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Blood Guardians

BLOOD GUARDIANS #1

BLOOD GUARDIANS (BLOOD GUARDIANS #1)

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Dedication

To those who love a good action adventure with a sweet tinge of history, I
dedicate this book.

As always, to my editor, who gives me the most blunt advice, and most
especially to my readers. I hope you enjoy this fun little novel.

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Chapter 1

The town was a dust bowl of broken dreams and faded memories.

Or at least that's what one stranger thought as he walked among the dark, dingy streets. Overhead was a clear night sky, and down below not even a cool breeze disturbed the dusty ground. He would have been glad for one. It would have made the air that much less stagnant.

The young man looked to be about twenty-five years old, but he walked with an air of one possessed in knowledge beyond his years. This small town out west had no theater to amuse him, so his footsteps were taking him to the nearest saloon. There maybe he could pass the time in some base amusement or be entertained by some other man's foolish antics.

And then there was the watching.

He always had a purpose in watching everyone in every town he traveled through now. He'd ran out of his supply of food a few weeks back, and was forced to scrounge up a meal where he could. That meant watching to see who was stupid enough to stumble out of one of these rough and tumble saloons only to pass out in some alley close by. Then he would get what he needed.

The town he was in right now wasn't big, maybe a thousand people counting the farms just outside. It'd been settled within memory and built up around the stage that passed through town every few days. That meant there was only one business street to attract the visitors of the coach, and the town made the best of it by stretching out for a good mile along the vehicle route. Houses spread out from the important road, and farmhouses lay beyond, closer to the river. There was also a nice school there taught by one of the local girls. He'd heard some whisperings about it earlier at the hotel he was staying, a gathering place for the old men when the general store shut down for the night, but he didn't think much of those talks. Everyone around him had such

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short stories that he never bothered to learn them anymore.

The town had about four saloons, and the young man chose the first one he came upon. It turned out to be one of the most popular for locals and travelers alike, and he was fortunate to find a seat in the far back. There he was partially hidden by the shadow of the overhang of the balcony upstairs. That hall led to the rooms where prostitutes worked their wares and men paid for their sins. His eyes swept across the crowd as they gambled and drank away their earnings for the day, and sometimes for the month. The young man had no interest in those affairs, though. He was out for his prey.

However, one boisterous table caught his attention. The men, four of them, were surrounded by some of the more well-endowed women of the brothel upstairs. Those men were well-dressed, even handsomely clothed, in the case of one prominent individual, and they appeared to be gambling quite large sums, if the gasps from their lady friends were any indication.

"Don't bet that much, Hank," one of the women cooed. She was wrapped around a swarthy gentleman who looked rather perturbed at her presence.

"Don't tell me what to do, woman," he angrily shot back. He slammed a fifty dollar gold eagle on top of the pile already laying in the center of the table, and then he scowled at his opponent across the table. It was the best-dressed gentleman. "Now what you got in your hand, Simeon," he demanded to know.

His opponent, apparently Simeon, smirked and laid out his hand. It was a straight flush. The portly gentleman was very displeased and threw his cards down on the table.

"You bastard," the unknown man swore. "You were just stringing me along."

"Perhaps," Simeon smoothly agreed. He had a voice that could charm a saint, but the young man sitting in the shadows didn't trust that. He'd met too many vipers hidden beneath those slick silk tones. "But no need to throw your cards. We're all

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friends here," he scolded as he swept his winnings toward him.

"Friends don't fool friends..." the portly man mumbled.

"Well, just think of it as an early wedding present to me," Simeon pointed out. The young man noticed a few of the saloon's patrons stiffened. He figured they were locals who were acquainted with this affair. "My bride-to-be will appreciate it."

"You don't have a bride until she says yes," one of their other companions at the table commented.

"She'll come to her senses soon," Simeon argued. There was a strain in his voice that hadn't been there before. Apparently matrimony wasn't suiting the woman he sought as a bride. "Besides, what other choice does she have?" he asked with a laugh.

Suddenly one of the listeners along the bar loudly pushed back his stool. His face was red and his hands were clenched into tight fists at his sides. He stalked up to the table of the wealthy men and glared at Simeon.

"Violet's too good for you," the man sputtered out. "Even if you were twice the man you are, she'd still be too good for you."

"So I'm not a perfect man, Jeb," Simeon agreed. He still had a smirk on his face. "But I can still support her better than this town can, unless you want to give her the life I can offer."

"She deserves to go to college," Jeb insisted. "But you ain't caring enough about what she wants to do to send her there."

"I don't see how sending a woman to college will help anyone," Simeon argued. "Besides, marriage fits her better," he added. He leaned forward across the table and the grin on his face was one filled with lechery. "She'll make a pretty little wife."

Jeb's face went from red to pale, and he lunged at the man. Simeon, though, was at the ready and pulled out a brand new pepper-box pistol. The room grew deathly quiet as he aimed six small barrels straight into the man's face. They would fire off a bullet with each pull of the trigger without him needing to reload.

"I wouldn't be making that kind of trouble for me, neighbor

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Jeb," Simeon calmly scolded. "Especially since I've as much a claim to her as any other man in this town."

"It ain't right," Jeb continued to protest. "She's too good for staying in a town like this."

"She's not too good for me," Simeon snapped back. He was getting angry now and he cocked his gun. "Now you just get out of here before I decide to plead self-defense in your trying to attack me."

Jeb glared at the man, but there wasn't anything else he could do but shuffle out the saloon doors.

"All right, folks, the show's over," Simeon announced to the room. He put away his gun and smiled at everyone. "You just get back to making your ruckus."

Everyone obeyed his orders, for he was one of the richest men in the county. No one but a few brave souls dared stand up against him for even a moment, and most then just ended up like Jeb. Threatened and beaten, and not willing to risk another confrontation for a long while.

The man in the corner, however, didn't worry about such matters. This story of human evil intrigued him, mostly because it reinforced his view of mankind as a blight upon itself. He must have been staring a little too intently, though, or the shadows weren't as deep as he had guessed, because Simeon turned his eyes on the stranger.

"Something I can do for you, boy?" the man rudely questioned.

"I doubt someone like you could ever help me," the stranger deftly shot back, apparently unperturbed by the insulting tone.

"A quick wit, that's rare for you young folks," Simeon smiled. He liked a challenge, and after that uneventful showdown with Jeb he was wanting to show off some of his moves with the gun. "Maybe I can teach you a lesson about respect for your elders."

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"Again I have doubt that you would know enough about respect to learn a toddler," the young man argued.

"I've got enough learning to teach you something." Simeon noisily slid back his chair and stood up. That got everyone attention again. He still held his gun in his hand, though the barrel was pointed at the floor. "You want the easy lesson or the hard lesson?"

"Mr. Durn, could you please take this outside?" the saloon owner pleaded. He didn't want enough trouble to cause him some property damage.

"Have a little more faith in my aim," Simeon countered. He cocked the hammer again. "So if this boy doesn't know what's good for him and apologize to his elder, he'll just get a nick of a bullet across his skin." He cocked his head to the side and his grin was maniacal. "Maybe across that nice face of yours."

The stranger smiled and slowly stood up. He held up his hands to show he was defenseless, but most of the crowd could see he had his own pistol at his waist. Apparently he had no intention of using the weapon to defend himself.

"You wouldn't shoot a man unwilling to defend himself, would you?" he challenged.

"If he insults me without apology, I'm liable to give him a lesson he won't soon forget," Simeon explained. He lifted his arm and pointed the pepper-box pistol at the young man. "Care to apologize now?"

"I'm afraid I don't care to," the stranger refused.

"Then hold still, boy, because this is gonna hurt a lot more if you move," Simeon advised.

Some of the ladies covered their eyes when the shot rang out, but the customers had seen enough of such things not to be bothered. However, even these world-weary gentlemen sat in shock and awe after the noise had settled. As far as anyone could see the young man had stood perfectly still, and yet there was no sign of his having been hit. Everyone in that saloon knew how

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well Durn handled a gun, especially at so short a range. For him to have missed was a statistical impossibility. Those closest to the young man could see the bullets lodged into the wall. They were almost directly behind where the young man stood. There was no way they could have been perfectly behind him without shooting through the boy.

"I guess your aim isn't really as perfect as you'd boasted," the stranger teased.

"What the hell..." Simeon muttered as he partially lowered the gun in amazement. "You fooling me?" he questioned.

"I'm not hit, if that's what you want to know," the young man informed him.

"Then I'm going to have to try again," his enemy suggested. He raised his gun again, and this time two bullets shot out of the chamber. The young man impassively stood there as though the other man had never taken shot. Simeon's mouth fell open. "What in the world..." he was heard to mutter.

Everyone else for their part sidled away from both the stranger and Simeon. The local still had three bullets left, and they didn't want to be near when his temper got the better of him. It certainly was doing that, from the way his body was shaking in fury.

"It this some sort of a trick, boy?" Simeon shouted. His shooting arm was still raised and the barrel still aimed at the young man. "Nobody can dodge bullets."

"Perhaps you have a bad aim," the stranger recklessly suggested.

"We'll just test that out again, shall we?" Simeon challenged. Everyone watched as he shot off another bullet, and it stuck into the wall with the others. His teeth clenched together. He wasn't used to being made the fool, and here was this young jackanape ridiculing him by doing nothing more than standing there. "All right, boy," he spat out. "You've carved your own headstone."

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Simeon aimed at the young man's head. Several of the women screamed and the men shouted for him to stop. The angered man didn't heed any of them as he shot off the last two bullets.

Then the riotous saloon grew eerily silent. The stranger stood there still smiling without a scratch on him. Simeon's gun was empty, and all the bullets were stuck fast in the wall behind the young man. Somehow the crack-shot man had missed on every account.

The stranger picked up his hat and nodded at his flustered and shocked opponent. Without another word the young man walked through the tables of shocked cowboys and out of the saloon. As soon as the entrance flaps stopped fluttering behind him the murmurs arose among the group. They spoke of the devilry or some cheap magic trick the boy had pulled to make their resident bully look foolish. Some glanced over to where Simeon still stood dumbfounded.

Then Simeon's confused face twisted into one of fury when he heard the talks of the saloon's customers. In a rage the rich man angrily tossed down his gun and marched through the tables to the corner. He looked around for the source of the boy's trickery, for mirrors and smoke, but he noticed nothing unusual. His eyes glanced over to the wall, and the bullets glistened against the overhead gas lamps. He practically jumped at them and dug one out. There was nothing imperfect about its design save for the smashed tip.

"He's gone mad," someone whispered behind him.

Simeon swirled around and glared at the crowd. Without his gun or his pride, however, he was a less intimidating character. Some of the local patrons even glared back. The man felt as though his grip on the town was slipping before his eye, all because of some strange boy who had pulled a fast one on him. He'd get his hands on that jackanape, but not tonight. Tonight he'd be licking his wounds and planning his next attack on the boy.

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With thoughts of revenge filling his mind, he pushed passed the tables, picked up his gun and left the saloon with his earnings for the night. He wasn't so angry that his stinginess was forgotten.

For his part the stranger swiftly led himself away from the saloon. He wanted no more trouble than what he'd already caused back there. There was already a dangerous enough task he had to perform this night, and as he strode along the boardwalk he spotted his target. A young prostitute was standing outside another of the town's saloons, greeting the customers. From the way she swayed from side to side, she'd apparently been partaking too much of the house liquor. The young man stepped up to her and smiled. She gave him a lopsided grin in return.

"I was wondering if you could help me for a moment," he pleaded. "I'm looking for a friend of mine, but I can't seem to find where he lives."

"You that lost in a one-horse town like this?" she hiccuped.

"Yes, there's just enough buildings for me to become lost." She couldn't tell through her alcohol-induced stupor that he wasn't telling the truth. "But I think it's supposed to be down this way," he intimated as he gestured to his left. Not far off was the end of the boardwalk and an alley where the light from the fire lamps along the street didn't shine. "If you would just show me the roads for a moment, I can find my way."

"Well, let's just step over there then," she invited with a toothy smile.

The stranger gently led her away from the door and down the steps of the boardwalk. She stared straight ahead, but his eyes were carefully watching her. They got as far as the entrance to the dark alley when the girl started getting scared. The alcohol in her blood wasn't strong enough to induce her into going any farther from the door, and most importantly the light.

"I don't think I should go any farther," she slurred. There was a hint of fear in her voice. "The boss'll get angry at me."

"That's fine, this is far enough," the stranger agreed.

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The prostitute glanced at his face and she jerked back when she noticed his strange eyes looking at her so intently. She tried to back up but his arm that had guided her this far wouldn't let her go. Not until he got what he'd come for. She felt herself growing drowsy, far more drowsy than the drink had made her. Her eyes grew heavy as he guided her back into the dark alley. There was an inaudible gasp from the shadowed path, and then quiet. A short time later only the stranger emerged from the alley. He paused only for a moment to look back.

The young woman lay against the back of the wooden building. Her eyes were closed and her skin was deathly pale, but she was breathing. Two small punctures on her neck were the only signs he ever left. The young man turned away, and he happened to catch something out of the corner of his eye. He lifted his gaze upward to the moon, but there was nothing unusual about the shining orb.

A few minutes later found the stranger walking into the small lobby of his hotel. Though the night was young, he figured he would perform the ruse of retiring to his room and then escape out the window to where his true resting place temporarily lay. The proprietor was standing at the desk, which worked well for the young man's plans. He'd hoped for a witness to his return. However, it appeared the man was waiting for someone to come in, and the stranger was curious to know for what purpose the man leaned over the desk at such an hour watching the door. The stage coaches didn't run at this hour, though, so the young man guessed he must have been waiting for a friend.

"Hey, feller," the owner called out just as the stranger passed him.

"Yes?" He wondered if perhaps there wasn't a letter for him.

"Mind if I talk to you about something?" the proprietor requested. The young man was surprised, and that surprise intrigued him.

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"All right," he readily agreed.

"We'll talk privately in my office," he suggested, and he nodded to the back room.

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Chapter 2

The owner swung open the piece of wood which blocked the way behind the desk and gestured for the young man to pass through, which he did. Then they went into a small office separated from the rest of the desk area by a thin wall and door. The hotel proprietor gestured for the stranger to sit in one chair while he took another. There wasn't even enough room in there for a desk, so an upturned box made do as a table.

"I know you're gonna think I've been sipping from the bottle too often, but I have something to request of you," the owner informed the stranger.

"A business matter?" the young man guessed.

"In a way I suppose you could look at it like that," the older man, Mr. Bellop, agreed. "I heard about your trouble with Simeon Durn tonight. You showed a lot of courage standing up to him like that."

"It doesn't take much to stand up to a bully."

"Well, it does for us simple folk," Mr. Bellop countered. "But what I'm getting at is a, well, I guess it's a charity case." The young man frowned. He didn't like the direction this conversation was going. "I'm sure you heard Jeb talking about our young schoolmarm, Violet Feld."

"I heard something about a woman," the young man concurred.

"Well, Mr. Feld, the schoolmarm's dad, passed on two years back," the proprietor explained. "And she was living with some nice old folks just outside the town, but they went back east a few months back to live with their own kids. They would've taken her, but they just couldn't afford it. That's leaving her without a home."

"What's this to do with me?" the stranger abruptly questioned.

"She's a smart girl, if a little on the shy side for being a

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teacher," Bellop admitted. "She's not yet eighteen but knows more about book learning than anyone else, even that ass Simeon," the hotel proprietor added. "And the town's been getting money together to send her to college back east but we just can't afford it, what with crop failures and the stage not running regular nowadays. I've been figuring that maybe a nice fella or lady would come by and be wanting to sponsor her way to school."

"And you believe I'm just the fella?" the stranger asked. Even he was a little flabbergasted by the man's forward request.

"I haven't always been around here," the owner told him. "I've seen my fair share of the world and done dealings with bad men as well as good. It kinda taught me to learn who I could trust and who I just needed to shoot dead." He leaned forward over the box between them. "I look at you and I see someone I can trust."

"I'm going to have to disappoint you," the stranger disagreed. He was mildly flattered by the assessment, but this arrangement wasn't suiting his tastes. "I doubt I'm suited to sponsor any young girl for college."

"I cant' agree with you there," Bellop countered. He rubbed his chin and looked over the young man. "I've been watching you since you came in on yer own carriage last night, and I think you're a good sort of fella."

"So was it my wealth that attracted you?" the young man half joked.

"It helped, but yer face sealed it for me," Bellop defended his analysis. "You're one who's too stubborn to quit and when ya make a friend, you keep 'em for life."

"That's a very long time," the stranger commented with a laugh. Bellop didn't quite get the joke, but he didn't need to. It'd be dangerous for them both if he had known the truth. "But I still believe you've got the wrong man for this job. Surely there's someone else you've seen who fits that admirable description."

"Nope, and we're running out of time," Bellop informed him. "That skunk Simeon is aiming for a wedding soon, and no

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one's up to stopping him."

"Why doesn't the young lady protest?"

"She can, but he owns half the county through his filthy money," the hotel owner explained. "Even if she wanted to get away, she wouldn't get far on any of these coaches."

"So what you're suggesting is a quick escape?" the stranger guessed, and his host nodded.

"Yep, and the sooner the better," the older man agreed.

"I still don't believe I can help, but I am interested in this young girl you speak so fondly of," the stranger wondered. His curiosity was peaked at any creature who could cause such loyalty among the simple, honest folk.

"That's the spirit. I'm sure you can help our girl," Bellop complimented. He leaned over and slapped the stranger roughly on the shoulder. Bellop noticed the young man didn't even flinch against his strength. "Now let's go see if she's back to her room. She generally likes to take walks out at night. Says it's to clear her mind after being stuffed up in a room all day."

"And she's safe this way?" the stranger wondered as they stood from their seats. "Aren't there thieves and murderers here?"

"None that would dare touch her," the proprietor proudly explained. He puffed out his chest and slammed one fist into the other. "They wouldn't last very long if someone did lay a hand on her."

"Admirable protection," he complimented. His thoughts, however, wandered back to the prostitute in the alley. He wasn't sure he took much stock in their protection of the women-folk, though to be fair she had been in a profession rife with risks. "You said she has lived here for a long while?"

"Most of her life," Bellop explained as they left the office. "A lot of us believe the town grew up around her more than she around the town."

The layout of the hotel was simple. There were rooms crowded along every wall but the front, and a second story which

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was also covered with rooms. From the stairs the hallway led straight passed two doors on either side and then forked down a left and a right path. The choice on the left took occupants down a long hall that passed more rooms, and then turned left to encompass the rest of the second floor in a giant L shape. The proprietor led them up the stairs and at the fork he turned right and stopped at the last outside room on the hall. This was a corner room which overlooked the front of the building and the street below. It was no doubt the best room in the hotel since it had two walls for windows and had easy access to the stairs. Bellop politely knocked on the door.

"Miss Violet?" he called out.

"Yes, Mr. Bellop?" a friendly female voice replied, and the door was opened.

The stranger had his first glimpse of the flower of the town, and he wasn't too disappointed. She was a pretty little thing, a little below average height and a head full of long, brown hair. Her well-proportioned form was clothed in a plain calico dress with worn shoes on her small feet. Her skin was pale, a sign of her confinement in the schoolhouse during the day, but she moved with an energy that impressed him. Her expressive eyes looked over both Bellop and the proprietor's young companion with kindness and curiosity.

"I was wondering if you wanted to meet a young man here," Bellop explained, and he gestured to the stranger. "Mr..." In all his eagerness to elicit his help, he'd forgotten the name the young fellow had written down in the book.

"Will Holbrook," he announced.

"A pleasure to meet you, Will," she replied with a smile. She politely held out his hand.

He gallantly took her fingers in his own and kissed her soft skin. Will froze for a moment when he felt a shock of some kind race through his body. He jerked back in surprise and his eyes darted up to her face. He couldn't say why, but there was

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something about this girl that caught his interest.

"Are you all right, Mr. Holbrook?" Violet wondered in worry. She'd noticed his face grew a little pale and thought perhaps he had suddenly taken ill. "Did you need to sit down?"

"I'm fine," he managed to choke out. He wasn't sure if that was a lie or not. "Merely a faint spell. It's passed now, though."

"It won't be any bother," she encouraged, and she led him inside the small room. There was a simple bed along one wall and a dresser opposite that. A chair stood by the bed with a washstand atop the dresser. Bellop followed them into the small area. "At least just for a moment."

"We're actually here on some business," Mr. Bellop piped up. "It's a matter of your schooling."

"Can't it wait for another night?" Violet pleaded. She was more concerned with Will than any of her personal affairs. "Or maybe later?" she added when she noticed Bellop's worried expression.

"Certainly it can wait," he agreed. He glanced down at the young man. "Did you need some help getting to your room, Mr. Holbrook?"

"I believe I'll have a talk with Miss Feld for a short while," Will informed them both. Violet was curious, but Bellop was glad to hear those words. It gave him hope that a deal could be made.

"All right, just call if either of you need anything," he offered before he left them alone.

Bellop, though trusting of Will, still left the door open for propriety's sake. As soon as his footsteps had disappeared down the hall, Violet looked back to her visitor.

"Are you sure you're all right?" she persisted as she looked him up and down.

"Quite all right now," Will replied. He glanced at the windows and the cool, inviting night beyond them. "Though I could do with some fresh air."

"So could I," Violet readily agreed with a smile on her lips.

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She wandered over to each of the two windows and opened them wide. The cool night air filled the room and she breathed deeply. "There's nothing so fresh as the night air, is there?" she asked of her companion.

"Perhaps the morning dew?" he suggested. He could only vaguely remember the sight of such a view, and the feeling itself was no longer even a memory.

"Perhaps, but then your shoes get all wet," she teasingly laughed. Her eyes looked him over again and they settled on the bulge on his left side. She tilted her head to the side, and he wondered at how innocent the expression looked. "Is that...is that a gun?" she hesitated to ask.

"Yes, a pepper-box pistol," Will explained. He didn't bring it out for her to look at, however, so she changed the subject.

"Mr. Bellop said something about business," she wondered. "Are you in business around here?"

"No, but Mr. Bellop hopes for me to do you a favor," he hinted at her college aspirations.

"So he's still trying to find a sponsor for me?" She sadly shook her head. The young lady sighed and turned to glance out the window. "I wish he wouldn't. Nothing's going to happen."

"Except maybe your marriage to Simeon," Will pointed out.

"I'd rather die than marry that evil man," Violet whispered.

Her cheerful face grew dark as she looked out onto the street far below them. Will worried for a moment that she would jump, but instead she turned away from the dark, lonely night. Her smile was back, but now he saw it for what it really was, a mirage. She was putting on a brave show for everyone who cared about her.

"But here I am being all gloomy," she scolded herself. "How long are you planning on staying in our small town?"

"Only for another night," he informed her. He felt it was safe to speak honestly. She wasn't an enemy to him. "I'm

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journeying back home to the east."

"It must be exciting traveling so far out here," Violet mused. She walked over and sat down beside him again. "You must have seen so many interesting places."

"Yes, I guess I have," Will half-heartedly agreed. For some reason he found it infinitely distracting having her sit by his side. Even with his feast earlier, his attention was focused too firmly on her neck. Her pulse beat softly and evenly beneath her pale skin. "You're hoping to travel one day?"

"Well, at least to the east for some schooling," she reminded him. She still held out hope, but there were no expectations. "What will you do when you reach home?" she asked in her turn.

"I'm not sure yet," he admitted. The young man stood up and strode over to the window. The air in the room was becoming stifling to him. "Whatever my father wishes me to do."

"So we're both trapped, aren't we?" Violet softly wondered. He half turned to look at her with a questioning glance. "I'm trapped here, probably to become that hateful man's wife, and you're destined to come and go at the bidding of your father."

"My father allows me more leeway than your destiny is allowing you," Will objected. He felt he had misspoken regarding his father. "His demands are not hard to meet."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to accuse him of anything," she apologized.

Violet rose to her feet and joined him at the window. Her soft eyes appeared bright in the light of the moon outside. For the first time that night, Will realized the orb in the sky had a red tinge to its glow. It was a blood moon.

"Beautiful night, isn't it?" she softly commented.

"Quite," he replied, but his tone was filled with distraction. His eyes kept wandering back to her pale, slender neck. "But maybe I've stayed too long," he confessed. Perhaps much too long for his own good, he thought. "Perhaps we will see each other

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again tomorrow before I leave."

"Wait," Violet pleaded, and she held out her hand to stop him. He turned and she shyly pulled her arm back. "Please...please don't go. It's so rare that I have anyone to speak to, at least so freely. Everyone else is so kind that I cannot bring myself to tell them how I really feel. I don't wish to disappoint them."

Will sighed and his eyes darted over to the moon shining through the window. The red color was growing darker. That was a bad sign. Then he did something reckless which sealed the night.

"Only for a short while," he grudgingly agreed. He sat back down on the bed and her face brightened with a smile. He was glad to see she was so easily pleased. "But I must insist you do not pry into my life with any further questions."

"Are you a desperate man on the run?" she teased, but her face fell when she noticed his serious expression. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it."

"It's nothing you can apologize for," Will countered.

He tensed up when she sat down again at his side. His hands twitched as thoughts of grabbing her passed by his mind. He knew he shouldn't be feeling these demands from his blood. He'd just partaken of his nightly repast. There should have been no urge to take this young flower.

"Is something wrong?" Violet innocently wondered when she noticed his stiffened posture. She leaned in closer to him. "Did you need a doctor?"

"I...I am fine," he stammered out. She wasn't helping his self-control by sitting so close. "Merely a health abnormality I suffer from."

"You look pale," she scolded. She reached up to feel his forehead and his hand snapped out to grab her wrist. She jerked back in surprise. "Will?" she trembled. She tried to free herself from him, but his grip was like iron. "Will, let go of me."

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Will for his part hardly heard her pleas. His focus lay on the soft skin of her neck. He could hear the blood pulsing through her veins, tempting him with each pump of her heart. Her warm body called to him like a sweet, seductive song. He felt himself slipping into the siren's quiet temptation.

"Will, please!" Violet begged. She was scared now as she looked into the depths of his eyes. They were dark, much too dark. Her hand grabbed at his to pull him off, but still he would not budge. "Will!"

Violet didn't even have time to scream when he suddenly wrapped his other hand around her and pulled her close to him. He buried his face into her neck and she felt two small, sharp points dig into her skin. Her eyes flew wide open and then her whole body stiffened. She could feel her blood flow freely from the wounds as he drained her of her life force. Her strength failed her and her body grew limp as her consciousness slipped away.

Will's eyes suddenly snapped open and he violently pulled away. He was gasping for air he did not need as he looked down at what he had done. Violet lay cold and still in his arms. Her breathing was shallow and growing less perceptible with each passing moment. He frantically opened one closed eyelid and then another, and he could see there was no response. In his frenzy he had taken too much of her blood. She would die soon, but only for a short time.

Unless he stopped the process.

Will gently set the dying woman on the bed and swiftly shut the door. Then he returned to kneel at the bedside, and his hand pulled forth his gun from its holster. There was only one way to deal with someone who was changing or changed, and that was to destroy them with a silver bullet.

However, Will paused for a moment in his duty as his eyes glanced over the pale young girl. Her youthful face was as pale as death now. Her skin no longer held the glow of life and her heart beat ever so slowly. His hand holding the gun trembled as the

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other cradled his head. He couldn't believe he had lost control and destroyed such a beautiful flower of life.

He had a responsibility to her now, though, and a duty to protect his secret. The young man couldn't stop a terrible thought from snaking its way into his mind. That maybe he could still make her dream of visiting the east come true, and learning an eternity of knowledge from his father's library. Such a fate would doom her to an existence of night. He did not know if this flower would thrive beneath a dark sky.

"I can't..." he whispered to himself.

He looked down at the gun in his hand. It had never misfired, but every bullet had the chance to be faulty. That's when he made up his mind. He would let fate decide. Will raised himself to his feet and cocked the hammer back. He carefully aimed the barrel at the young girl's head even as she breathed her last breath. His hand was steady now, and he slowly pulled back the trigger.

Click.

Will stood there for a moment in pure disbelief. The bullet remained in its chamber. The powder had not ignited. It was faulty.

"Well, I'm in trouble now," he mused, and he put the gun back in its holster.

He leaned over and gently scooped up the cold figure. She was dead now, but that would not be permanent. Tomorrow night she would awaken, and then he would have much explaining to do. Over the small hotel room the blood-red moon waned and disappeared. Its warning was past, and what it had foretold had come true. There was another vampire among the ranks.

Chapter 3

Will easily jumped out the window and dropped to the ground in the alley between the hotel and the next business. He cradled his precious bundle close to his chest and peeked out down the street. There was no one around. They were either long gone to bed or were still carousing in the saloons. He flitted through the streets and soon they were out into the more rural parts of the settlement.

Their destination was a small abandoned cabin about two miles outside the more populated areas. The decrepit building was hidden by bramble bushes and wild grass. Will pushed passed them and stepped inside the single-room structure. There was no furniture but for a simple wooden box overturned to make a table. In the far corner lay what he sought. It was a large, oblong wooden box, about three feet wide and made of the finest dark cherry wood.

Will gently set Violet's body down close by the box, and he opened the lid. Revealed inside was a soft, plush red velvet interior. He turned back and gently picked up Violet's still form, then set her upon the comfortable padding. Her head turned away from him, and he mournfully looked over her stiff body. The color had gone from her cheeks and her arms were limp at her sides. If nature had taken its course, she would have stiffened soon. Nature, however, had nothing more to do with her, or either of them for that matter.

Will stood and wandered outside. There was a stump sitting just beyond the bushes, and to this he seated himself. Silently he watched the night pass by without any thought beyond the girl who lay in his coffin. He knew so little of her, and she less of him. He was the impassive, educated gentleman, and she the soft, bright flower of a small town. This seemed an imperfect match of strangers from two very different worlds. He wondered if his own father had felt these doubts after his own turning those

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many years ago.

After a long while he pulled out his gun and glanced over the barrel and trigger. Nothing appeared to be wrong, and out of curiosity he raised the barrel to a tree not far off. His finger pulled the trigger. The shot rang out, and the bullet struck the bark. It had only been a misfire. It made him wonder if he'd done the right thing in letting the gun decide her fate. That was an ill-omened way to begin a new life. Then again, this would be a life fraught with danger. That would be a problem for tomorrow, however, and the countless nights after that one.

Will had left enough space for himself to slip beside her if he lay on his side, and this he did. He closed the lid and the box was engulfed in complete darkness, but that was no hindrance to his sight. He could see her perfectly, and he slowly reached out to brush a finger against her soft cheek. Tomorrow night there would be life in her again, but now there was only the touch of death. He closed his eyes and lay one arm across her waist. Day was coming, and it was time to rest.

The next night came all too soon for the two forms who lay still inside the coffin. Neither had moved even an inch during the entire day, but now Will's eyes fluttered open. He felt movement at his side, and as he glanced over he saw the girl's eyelids twitch. The transformation was beginning.

Will hurriedly lifted the lid of the coffin to allow some fresh night air into the stuffy confines. He sat up and pulled her against his chest even as her body began to convulse. Her arms jerked and her teeth clenched. She struggled and twisted in his grasp, but he held her firm. Out of instinct her breaths came out in quick gasps and her hands grasped the edges of his coat. Her body suddenly arched and her mouth opened in a soundless scream. He watched in fascination as her canines lengthened and the nails on her fingers sharpened to deadly points. She convulsed for a

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moment longer before her body relaxed back into his arms. Her transformation was complete, and she slowly opened her eyes.

Violet's brown eyes had changed to a red auburn, and instead of the innocence she had held they were now filled with fear. Those bright orbs flitted around herself and then she tried to push herself away from him.

"Easy there," he gently scolded as he held firm. The disorientation always occurred when a new one awoke. "You're all right now."

"Where am I?" she pleaded to know. Her throat was dry and the sound of her words came out in a hoarse whisper. "What happened?" She was frightened by this unknown place and his face that she did not immediately recognize.

"We met last night, remember?" he insisted with a smile. She turned to gaze intently into his face, and then she froze. Apparently she did remember. Quite well, in fact. She also had enough energy to start struggling in his arms again. "I'm not going to hurt you," he tried to comfort her.

"Let go of me, you brute!" she insisted. He obeyed her command and released her. She quickly scrambled out of the coffin. The young woman was breathing heavily and backing away from him. Her eyes flitted about for escape, but the door covered by bushes wasn't obvious to her frightened sight.

"You don't have to do that," Will pointed out. His hope was to distract her from her fear, and his question was partially successful. She at least stopped moving backward.

"Do what?" she hurriedly questioned.

"Breathe."

"Are you mad, sir?" Violet demanded to know. That's when her eyes noticed the doorway, and she made a wild dash to escape. However, Will was still much faster than she was and cut her off before she reached the exit. She stumbled back in surprise and awe at his swift intervention. She hadn't seen him move at all.

"You shouldn't do that," he gently warned.

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"I demand you release me!" Violet ordered. She tried to step around him but he moved into her way.

He really couldn't let her out there, not until he was sure she was perfectly stable. He had heard too many tales of vampires who, driven mad with an influx of fear, emotions and past memories from their guardian, destroyed whole towns and villages. She seemed to be the opposite, though, with her small, frightened demeanor, but that, too, could still cause him problems. Right then he greatly wished his father had prepared him better for this situation, but then again, he never expected himself to be a guardian so soon.

"Do you remember who you are?" he asked as he stepped toward her. She backed away.

"What are you asking?" she flustered. Her arms were defensively held up against her chest to keep him at a distance.

"I'm asking you for your name," he gently rephrased. "Do you know who you are?"

"You know my name, Mr. Holbrook," she spat out. They were no longer on good terms, and first names would not do for opponents.

"But repeat it for me, will you? My memory is not so well as your own." A lie, of course, but it was necessary. She hesitated and scowled at him. She wondered if this was some sort of trick, but she couldn't imagine how her own name could be used against her.

"Violet Feld," she softly informed him.

Violet suddenly gave a shiver and wrapped her hand around her bare arms. She hurriedly let go as though she were burned by the feel of her own skin. She was as cold as ice. That's when she began to realize something was terribly wrong. The soft beating of her heart and the working of her organs, unnoticed in life, were now noticed in their absence. Her body began to tremble and tears of frustration rose to her eyes.

"Do you remember precisely what happened last night?" he

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insisted on asking her.

"You...you attacked me," she replied. She reached up and brushed her hand against the small wounds. They would remain there for the rest of her existence. "What...what did you do?" She was noticing how very wrong this whole affair felt.

"I fed on you," Will bluntly replied. He figured there would be no point in giving her the soft treatment. The truth would have to be known sooner or later. Violet's eyes widened, but she still couldn't quite understand his meaning. "I drained you of your blood and in so doing I killed you."

Now she was really panicked. She didn't believe him, but there was a fear in her still heart that perhaps he wouldn't really try to kill her.

"You're mad, aren't you?" she trembled. She stepped farther back and wildly looked for another route of escape. "Help! Somebody help me!"

She was a tough case. Typically for new vampires there existed a psychic bond with their creators hidden inside their mind once they've been turned. The bond contained duplicates of the creator's own memories in order to speed the fledgling vampire's abilities along and ensure their survival. Those memories also allowed the new vampire to understand their new existence and accept what they had become. Apparently here was a case where the memories were still locked inside her mind. That meant he would need to unlock the memories himself. Unfortunately that would involve touching her, and she was having none of that as she moved farther away from him. He would need to do this by force.

"I can apologize for this later, Violet," he whispered.

Before she could even flinch back, Will was in front of her. He took hold of her around her waist and pulled her against him. She struggled in his iron grasp while his gaze caught her own frightened eyes.

"Relax," he tried to comfort. She didn't heed his advice as

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she resumed her struggling. She placed her arms against his chest to push herself away, but he held her steady against himself. "This won't hurt, I promise."

"Enough of your lies," she spat out.

"No lies." His voice was soft and low. She glanced up at him with fire in her eyes, but he managed to capture her gaze and held her there. "Just rest," he soothingly commanded. "This won't take long."

Violet stared into his eyes as he dove into her mind. He was searching for the lever to pull open the psychic bond between them. In his browsing he felt her fear and betrayal toward him, and he felt both were justified. He hadn't given her a choice regarding this new life, and now she was trapped with him as a companion until she could handle herself alone out there. Among those strong emotions, Will was glad to find the area in her mind where their connection lay. He figuratively opened the door to the bond, but in doing so he felt as though there were still so many more doors that refused to release.

The moment he unlocked the area, Violet gasped. Those memories and the realization of what she had become nearly overwhelmed her. Her legs buckled and her body violently shook. He gently lowered her to the ground and she clutched at him like a drowning man to a piece of driftwood. Tears fell softly from her eyes as she began to sob. He cradled her in his arms as she wept for her humanity. Even with having the choice, he'd done the same all those years ago. Maybe they all did.

"What...what have you done to me?" she sobbed into his shirt.

"Fate decided this," Will replied. He felt it was a poor excuse, but he didn't want her anger. That wasn't a good way to start out this long relationship. They needed to be close for them both to survive, he protecting her and she to grow strong enough to protect herself. This dark world had nightmares waiting in the shadows for unwary vampires. "But you have to trust me now."

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"Do you understand why?" She shook her head. "Come now, you must know."

"I don't know. I don't care," she protested. She was trembling again, fighting him, fighting who and what she was now.

"You have to. There's no other way around this." Her head shot up and she scowled at him.

"There was a way if you'd only let me alone!" she cried out. She tried to push herself away, so in a deft move he flipped her around and wrapped his arms around her waist. He held her like he would a doll while she thrashed and squirmed. "Let me go, you...you monster!"

"Not until you answer these questions," he promised. "They are too important to ignore. After that, I will let you go."

Violet grew silent and sullen, but she stopped trying to get out of his arms. Instead she turned her face away from him, but he could still feel her shaking and hear her muffled sobs. They stayed that way for a few minutes. He didn't mind. They had time.

"Will you...will you really let me go if I answer them?"

"I will let you go, but I can't release you," he explained. She stiffened but nodded for him to continue. "Do you understand why you need to trust me?"

"Because...because we're connected?" She sounded unsure, but that was all right. It was the correct answer.

"Good," he encouraged her. He loosened his grip slightly as a reward, but he wouldn't let her go quite yet. "Now, do you understand what you are?"

"I-I...I don't know," she hesitated.

"Why don't you?"

"I don't understand the word."

"What is it?" he asked her.

"Vampire?" With her narrow scope of the world, this wasn't unexpected.

"It's a creature who survives by preying on the living and drinking their blood," he softly explained. She flinched at this

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revelation. "But not quite yet for yourself. There will be time enough for that another night." Violet turned her head down, and her body was shaking again.

"Why...why did you do this to me?" Violet softly asked. She was crying again, but her tears silently slid down her cheeks. She was still so scared. He pulled her closer and she didn't struggle this time. Maybe the memories were working and she was more trusting of him. That, or she was just too tired to struggle any longer. She hadn't fed yet, and that made her weak.

"I don't know," Will honestly replied. He had no explanation for a question he himself couldn't answer.

"What will happen to me now?"

"You'll come with me," he explained to her. There was no argument, but neither did she act with joy. "My father-my guardian," he corrected himself. There was no longer any point to keeping up that ruse. "He will be better able to instruct us on how to proceed."

"Guardian?" That word struck a chord inside her.

"Yes. I am your guardian, and my guardian still exists. We will go see him." She didn't respond at all. She was limp in his arms. He sighed and released his hold.

Violet didn't waste the opportunity for freedom. She scrambled to her feet and turned to him, but he still sat on the dusty floor. There was no more anger in her stance, but there was pain. He had betrayed her trust in the worst way possible. Her eyes were accusing as they looked over his impassive face.

"Have you no pity? No soul?" she softly accused. "You show no remorse for what you have done to me."

"I've done far worse."

"Is that all you have to say?" Violet asked in disbelief. She could not fathom anything crueller than to bring someone into this strange and unknown existence. "I did not ask for this...this curse!" She held out her hands and looked at the pale fingers. Her hands trembled and she slowly dropped to her knees.

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"What...what demon am I?" She cupped her head in her hands and cried in despair. He sighed and scooted over to her. He didn't wrap his arms around her, but rather only sat at her side. He thought she hadn't noticed him when she suddenly latched onto his waist. She buried her head into his shirt. She was already faster than he expected. "Please don't leave me," she pleaded. "I don't want to be alone."

"You won't be." He softly petted her smooth hair and sighed. This one was going to take some time to adjust. "But I have to go for a short time now." She gripped him harder and he was pleased with her strength. "I will return, you must believe me."

"Can't I go with you?" she pleaded. He wasn't sure if this was the guardian-attachment speaking, or if she genuinely didn't want him to leave. He regretted the separation, also, but either way it was safer if she stayed in the old building.

"You must stay here," he firmly ordered. He lifted her chin up and smiled down at her. "This task won't take more than an hour. You can rest here while I attend to the errand."

"What are you doing?" She was so much like a child now. He had much to teach her.

"We need my horses and carriage to take us east. They are still in the care of the town's livery," he explained, and he stood to his feet. He raised her with him and escorted her over to the box in the corner. It would be their sleeping quarters for much of their journey. "You can rest in here." He tried to guide her inside, but she clung onto him. She feared the confines of the coffin. "There's nothing to fear. You'll sleep here until I get back."

"But I'm not sleepy." He had no doubt about her honesty, what with her wide, scared eyes.

"There's a trick I know to make you sleep," he explained. She agreed to sit down inside, but she wasn't comfortable. She pushed her back against one side, pushed her legs against her chest, and stared up at him. He knelt down beside the box and

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looked into her eyes. "Sleep now, little one."

The trick that had been played on him more than once worked on her as well. Her eyes rolled back and her lids shut. He caught her and lowered her onto the simple pillow at the head of the coffin. His hand came up to caress her white, bloodless cheek. She was such a frail thing now, but blood would brighten up that skin.

He stood and listened for a moment. Everything was quiet for a few miles around the building. Now he had the small problem of getting out of town with his treasure.

Chapter 4

Will hurried his way back to the small town. The saloons were alive with business and their patrons walked the streets in drunken groups or as staggering individuals. The livery was at the end of the dusty street close to the hotels to accommodate passengers on the stagecoach. He aimed his steps toward the tall barn-looking building and found the manager inside caring for the horses.

Will could see his carriage and horses were in the far back of the building. They were not hitched up as he expected. He had instructed the man to have everything ready by this time on this night. He walked up to the manager of the livery.

"I've come for my animals and carriage," he bluntly informed him.

"That night already?" the man drawled.

"Yes, and I wish to have the horses hitched as soon as possible."

"I don't see my way of doing that until I ask you some things," the manager demanded. He turned to Will and his grin put the young man on his guard. There was something not trusting about it, like he was hiding something behind that smile. "There's been a lot of talk today about a girl around here disappearing."

"What's that to do with me?" Will shot back.

"Apparently some gent matching your looks was the last one to see her," the manager mused. "You don't happen to know where this girl is, do ya?"

"I don't even know her name, much less what girl you're referring to," the stranger retorted.

"Her name's Violet Feld," the manager informed him. He squinted his eyes looking for a reaction, but was disappointed when the young man was as indifferent as before. "My boss Mr. Durn is awful worried about her. He's even got a reward out for finding her."

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"What your boss does is his business, not mine," Will replied. He could see this affair was getting messier. They needed to leave quickly before Simeon's reward caught the attention of desperate men in search of quick money. "Now will you hitch the horses or must I?"

The man made no immediate move to go over to the steeds, so Will stepped toward them. The manager wasn't having any of that, and tried to grab his arm. Before he could even blink, Will pulled out his gun and pointed the barrel in the man's face.

"Get out now, or I will do worse to you," Will threatened in a low, firm voice.

"Woah, no need to get that fired-up," the livery manager tried to sooth his angered client.

Will cocked back the hammer, and he got the message. The man quickly sprinted out of the building, and Will locked the door behind him. Then the young man proceeded over to his steeds. They were a pair of fine-looking, tall black horses. He'd befriended them as colts, and they did not fear his unnaturalness. On the contrary, the horses' bond with their master transcended even the barrier of speech, so when he gave them an order they obeyed without hesitation.

Quickly they were led to the carriage and hitched up, but even then the task took a few minutes. When he had cinched the last rope Will heard a pounding on the door.

"You in there, boy?" Simeon called from the street. Will frowned. He had hoped to elude the foolish man. "We got you covered this time, boy, and there ain't no way you can dodge your way out of all these bullets. Just come out and tell us where you hid that girl."

Will slid over to the doors and peeked out a small space between the wall boards. Outside in the street was gathered a great crowd from several of the saloons. It was the manager of the livery who had pounded on the door. In the center of the wide dirt path stood Simeon surrounded on both sides by two pairs of

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men. They were indeed all armed and every one of them had their pistols drawn. He was going to have a difficult time getting out of here without the horses getting shot.

Will returned to the steeds and scratched them behind the ears. They softly nickered in glee.

"You must stay here until I give the signal. When that happens, break through the door and head for the abandoned house where my coffin sits," he whispered to them. He smiled as they both enthusiastically nodded.

Now Will focused his attention on the problems outside. He stepped back to the large doors and noisily threw off the board which had kept them closed. The livery manager moved back and the gunmen's firearms pointed at the entrance when one of those wide slabs of wood swung open. Will stood there in the doorway with his hands raised above his head.

"Don't shoot," he loudly announced to the crowd. He cautiously stepped out into the street and shut the door behind himself. "I surrender."

The gunmen were too well-trained to believe the ploy, as he expected, and Simeon didn't call for them to lower their guns.

"Where's the girl, boy?" Simeon demanded to know. He glared at his opponent through the thick darkness. Fortunately Will had the advantage in such limited light. "I know you're trying to keep her from me. That fool Bellop told me everything."

Will realized this was to his advantage. Bellop had no doubt bragged to Simeon that Violet would be well taken care of away from his clutches. That meant only Simeon's men would be trouble for them when they left the town. That, however, was enough trouble to cause him some worry. The man had power and reach, and they were at a disadvantage during the day should they be found by his men.

"You gonna tell us where she is, boy, or do we have to force the information out of you?" Simeon questioned again when Will did not immediately reply.

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"As I told your lackey here, I don't know what you're talking about," Will called back. "Your own people are not my affair."

"We'll just have to make it then, won't we?" Simeon challenged. He turned to his left and to the men standing there. "Shoot his legs, that should make him start talking."

They pulled back the hammers on their guns and aimed the barrels down at his lower limbs. However, just as their fingers pulled the triggers the stranger suddenly vanished. The gunmen, Simeon and the manager looked at the empty spot in shock. Then someone shouted in terror from the boardwalk.

"Behind you!"

The armed men all swirled around, but it was too late for the gunmen to Simeon's left. Will jabbed his elbow into the gut of the first and charged at the second. His fist connected with the man's face and all the onlookers cringed as the sound of bones cracking echoed through the air. The other gunmen didn't stand much chance, either, as Will went for them. They were able to cock their guns in his direction and fire off a wild shot apiece before he was fist sparring with them. Those men joined their fellows on the dusty ground, and in less than a minute the only ones standing were Simeon and his livery manager. The hired man wasn't armed, and he held up his hands to show he meant no harm.

"Please don't hurt me," he pleaded as Will stood up from the dust. The man's breath stopped in his throat when those cold, dark eyes turned on him. "Mercy."

Simeon scowled at such a betrayal. From his past experience he had little faith in hitting Will by himself, but such a disgusting display of cowardly disloyalty could be avenged.

"Damn pig," Simeon growled as he cocked his gun. His target wasn't Will, however, but the groveling livery manager.

Suddenly the stranger was face to face with Simeon. His pepper-box pistol was pulled from his hand and tossed far across the road. Simeon's mouth dropped open and he stumbled back in

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fear. He tripped over his own feet and fell to the ground in a cloud of dust.

"W-what the hell are you?" he stammered out.

"A creature from your nightmares," Will announced. He lifted his hand to his mouth and blew a whistle.

The horses and carriage broke through the doors and thundered down the road. Will dashed to the driver-less vehicle and swiftly jumped up into the box. He grabbed the reins and managed a glance back. Simeon had stood up and the ugly expression on his face told Will there would be more trouble in the future from that man.

"Yaw!" he yelled at the horses, and they sped off through town.

They reached the outskirts and turned onto the road which led to the abandoned building. The task had taken longer than he'd expected, and he reached the lone house a good hour after he'd left. He stopped the horses and jumped off only to hurry into the structure. Will was relieved to see Violet still lay in the coffin safe and asleep, and he breathed a sigh of relief as he knelt down beside her. He brushed aside a stray strand of her brown hair, and he smiled when she frowned and turned away.

Then Will quickly packed what few supplies he had, namely a case of clothing for himself. When the box was put into the carriage, he gently lifted Violet and placed her on one of the plush seats inside the vehicle. The coffin was strapped to the top, and in a trice he'd mounted the box. The horses were ready and with a call they were heading down the dusty road which led to the stagecoach trail. He skirted the edge of town by a good few miles and saw no one following them, but his mind wasn't at ease. Their escape was too easy and their foe too angered for him to believe there wasn't trouble brewing.

They rode hard all night and made a good many miles before Will began to feel the threat of the sun along the horizon. Fortunately the stagecoach trail was populated with towns large

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enough to have hotels, and at the next stop in the post he halted the horses. He hopped off the box and opened the door to the carriage. Inside Violet was still fast asleep.

Will left her for only a moment when he went to make the usual arrangements. The horses and carriage would be watched during the day while he and his companion slept. With their room paid for, the young man returned to his unconscious charge. He carefully picked Violet up and carried her to their room. The hotel proprietor couldn't help but notice her state.

"Our journey has been a long one, and she's very fatigued," he quickly lied. The owner took the lie at face value and Will had no more interruptions on the way to their room.

The hotel itself was only a single story, and because of this Will had chosen a room at the far back. It would allow them the most privacy from the front street. He carefully set Violet down on the bed, and the coffin had already been carried in by himself. He trusted no one else with their sleeping quarters. Then Will seated himself beside Violet, and he thought about their predicament. The distance between them and Simeon was not great enough to give him comfort, but they had nature on their side. There had been no rain in the area recently so the wheels hadn't left imprints in the hard ground. Unfortunately their destination followed the coach line, so any gunmen hired by Simeon could easily track them. They needed to get off the busy road for a few days. That gave Will an idea, and it would only take most of a night's ride to reach the new location where they could hide out until the path was clear.

For now, though, the current night was growing old. The rays of the sun were peeking out over the horizon as he carefully set Violet inside the coffin. As he was closing the lid a stream of light traveled over the sill of the window and hit him in the hand. He yelped and yanked his hand inside before either of them were more seriously burned.

Will glanced at his fingers and frowned. The skin was

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scorched and a few boils popped up from the skin. It would take some days to heal, but he would have full use of it after that time. Violet at his side uncomfortably shifted against him. She could no doubt sense his discomfort through their bond, and it worried her even in her sleep. He slid down and wrapped his arms around her to provide some comfort. Even with his stoic manner he couldn't help but smile as she buried her face into his shirt and fell into the deep sleep. He joined her moments later while outside the sun announced the new day with its presence.

The coming of night drew them out of their slumber. They both awoke at roughly the same time when the sun completely set outside, alerting their instincts that it was safe to come out and prowl the streets. Violet's eyes fluttered open and some life returned to her pale cheeks when she realized she was pressed up tight against Will's body. She pushed back against the side of the coffin with a habitual muttering of an apology.

"No need," Will amicably brushed aside. He raised the lid and sat up. "This coffin was not meant for two occupants." She, too, arose and was very confused to find them in a room rather than the decrepit building.

"Where are we?" she wondered as she looked around. Will stepped out of the coffin and gallantly helped her to stand.

"Some distance from your home," he explained to her. He noticed a hint of sadness enter her eyes at the thought of leaving her town. "There was some trouble with Simeon, and a quick exit was necessary."

"Where are we going?" Violet quietly asked as she wrapped her arms around herself. She perfectly understood that she was at his mercy. Any protests on her part would be fruitless.

"To the east eventually, but for now we are only making distance between us and Simeon." He had hoped she would feel some thrill at heading to the east, but she only showed

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indifference. There were other more pressing issues than her whims, however. "Are you hungry?"

"No," she replied with a shake of her head. "Not at all."

"Perhaps later then," he mused. He glanced down at her wardrobe, and she followed his curious eyes. Her cheeks blushed again when she noticed her dress was covered in filth from the abandoned house. "I would have us stop at a tailor, but we haven't time."

Violet wasn't sure how to react. She had such conflicting thoughts on this man. One side of her told her to trust him, and the other demanded she fear his very presence. Her wary eyes glanced down at his hand, and she noticed the burn.

"What happened?" she wondered as she nodded at his injury.

"A little accident with the sun." He held up the scorched flesh for her to see, but she glanced away. It was a horrible burn, with partially melted skin over the blisters. He wondered if she would be as squeamish with the first sight of blood. "A lesson for us both that the sunlight is our enemy. For now, though, we will journey a little farther passed Simeon's reach and then we will rest again." He moved over to the door and noticed she didn't immediately follow. "We have to fetch the horses," he told her.

"You want me to go out there looking like this?" Violet asked him. She brushed her hand across the front of her dress and a thin veil of dust scraped off.

"Unless you prefer to be left alone?" Will countered. He knew she didn't want that any more than he did. Their bond was still in the fledgling stage, and would remain so until he was sure she could survive on her own. Sometimes that took only a few months, sometimes decades. It almost entirely depended on the abilities of the new vampire.

"All right," she sighed. She would put aside her mortification for a short while.

He led the hesitant Violet out into the hall and firmly

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locked the door behind them. Then they moved forward to the front of the hotel and passed by the owner behind the desk, who hailed them before they left.

"I might want to warn you folks that there are some rough men asking for you," the proprietor warned as he leaned over the desk. "I didn't give them no information on your staying here, but you might want to leave before there's trouble."

"We're much obliged," Will politely replied. Violet edged closer to him after they left the hotel. It was evident from her wide, flitting eyes that she expected an ambush at any moment and that she had yet to master how to see in the dark. "It will be all right," he tried to comfort her in a low voice.

"Do you think Simeon sent them?"

"Undoubtedly," Will agreed, and he glanced from one side of the street to the other. There was no way to tell which of the men were those to which the hotel owner was referring, so he made sure to keep Violet close beside him. Ultimately she was their target, though he was sure that toward himself revenge would be in order.

It was not far to the town livery, however, and once there they procured their rested horses and carriage.

"That's an interesting pair of steeds you got there," the livery man complimented as he watched them greet their master. "Never known any that were more gentle than a lamb."

"They must trust you," Will commented in his turn. He glanced back at Violet, who stood a few yards away. "They'll allow you to pet them."

"Are you sure?" She still hesitated. They were tall horses, and their eyes showed an intelligence that was discomfiting to those unaccustomed to being around steeds.

"Trust me," he replied, and he held out his hand to her. She glanced between his face and open palm, and then accepted the invitation. Once her hand had slipped into his own, he led her forward to the black horses. "Their names are Boreas and Euros,"

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he explained to her. He gestured to each as he spoke their names. The only difference she could tell between the two was the one named Boreas had its mane brushed toward the back, and Euros had his brushed to the right.

Will guided her hand toward their muzzles, and the horses bravely pushed their nostrils against her fingers to take in her scent. She froze as their large eyes looked her over. They must have been able to smell her unnatural existence, just as they could with their master. This proved to be a boon for her, however, for they whinnied in delight and pushed their noses more firmly against her. Her scent was nearly identical to Will's own, and they found comfort in that. Violet laughed and scratched their foreheads.

"Let's go now," Will gently commanded. They had wasted enough time with the introductions.

The horses were hitched to the carriage, and their feed and stalls promptly paid for from Will's purse. Violet noticed he used gold coins of various sizes, and most were no doubt worth a great deal. He must have been very rich. Will led the horses to the hotel and he was not pleased to see a few unknown steeds tied up at the post outside their temporary residence.

"Stay here," he commanded to Violet, and he slid off the box. They needed to quickly get the coffin and get out of town.

"That's far enough, monster," someone ordered. A large man holding a cocked gun stepped out of the hotel door. The barrel was aimed straight at Will, and the stranger's lips curled back in an ugly grin. "Mr. Durn's got a bounty on your head, boy."

"I couldn't care less," Will challenged. Violet's heart would have been beating quickly had it still been able to do so as she glanced between the two men. Her guardian would certainly be killed at so close a range, there was no way the man could miss his heart.

"Please don't hurt him," she blurted out in desperation. She slid down off the box and Will unwillingly caught her. He'd rather

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she had stayed up there. "If it's me you're after, then I'll go back."

"That's enough," Will ordered. He could appreciate her self-sacrifice, but right now there wasn't any need. He turned his attention back to the man. He was now flanked by two other men who had slunk out of the alleys on both sides of the hotel. "When you return, you can tell Simeon to give up his futile efforts."

"I think you can tell him that yourself," the main gunman commented. "Simeon wants you both back alive, but he said we could make an exception for you, boy."

"Back alive?" Will repeated. He chuckled a little and pushed Violet closer to the carriage door. "I'm afraid he's a few centuries too late for that."

Suddenly the gunmen's target disappeared before their very eyes. Violet's mouth, too, opened in surprise when her guardian essentially vanished.

"It's one of his tricks! Grab the girl and get outta here!" the leader shouted.

One of the men moved forward and reached out to take Violet, and that's when Will appeared behind the man. The gunman screamed out in agony when the vampire grabbed his gun arm and twisted it back. The cracking of bones startled Violet and their other adversaries. The leader aimed his gun and fired a few shots at Will. One struck his comrade in the shoulder, but another one hit its intended victim.

Violet screamed as the injured gunman fell to the ground and hit his head on the boardwalk, knocking him unconscious. Will himself staggered back. The bullet had hit the upper part of his ribcage where his heart lay. Blood poured out of the wound and his hand covered the hole to try to stop the bleeding.

"Looks like we're taking you dead," the lead gunman commented with a wicked laugh.

"No..." Violet whispered. She didn't know it was possible for her to still cry until the tears slowly slid down her pale cheeks. She held out a shaking hand to her guardian. "Will!"

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Hearing her scared voice Will raised his head. He had a grimace on his face and his skin was deathly white.

"Just stay there," he ordered through clenched teeth. "This won't take very long, but you might not want to watch."

"What?" she replied. She didn't understand.

Violet gasped when she realized his front canines were stretching out over his lips. His own auburn eyes glowed with a devilish fire, and they shot a glance of fury at the two gunmen still standing. The young woman stumbled back when her guardian vanished again. The lackey gunman screamed when Will reappeared beside him and plunged his fangs into the man's neck. Will wasn't careful with how he broke through the skin, and blood poured out of the large, torn holes.

The leader stumbled away with his mouth open in horror. His comrade dropped to the ground, still breathing but unconscious. Will turned to the leader, and his face was covered in his victim's dark blood. The lone gunman shook his head in disbelief as his back collided with the railing. The horses behind him were pulling at their reins as Will slowly stepped over to the man.

"Get away! Get away from me!" he screamed as he lifted his gun. He fired off several more wild shots, and one of them collided with Will's shoulder. That didn't even cause the vampire to pause. "Stay away from me, monster!"

Violet covered her mouth to stifle her scream as Will grabbed him and sank his fangs into the leader's neck. The man's garbled cries petered out into nothing as most of his blood was drained. Soon the gunman's body dropped to the ground, again still breathing but with not enough energy to be conscious.

The only sounds now were Violet's soft sobs. Her back was turned away from the carnage and her face was cradled in her hands. In her young life she had never witnessed such gory horror. The pressure from this new existence, too, was just too much for her to emotionally handle. She flinched when a hand fell on her

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shoulder, and she spun around to find her guardian standing there. When she glanced up into Will's face, the sight of all that blood caused her to stumble back in fear and terror.

Will's teeth were of normal length again, and the wound over his heart no longer bled. An expression of sadness crossed his face when she flinched from his touch.

"It's all right," he tried to sooth. He tried to reach out to her, but she skittered back like a frightened animal. He didn't want her to be like that, not to him. "Please don't be afraid."

"Have you...have you killed them?" she managed to choke out. He paused and glanced back at the still gunmen.

"They will live," he blandly told her. He had no pity for those foolish humans. They had asked for the trouble, and found it was too much for them. "But we have to depart from here before more trouble comes." Even now, with the shots no longer ringing out, he could hear the town come alive to see what had been the source of the commotion. Will opened the door to the carriage and gestured for her to enter. "We haven't much time."

Violet turned her face away from him, but she stepped inside the vehicle. He firmly shut the door and strode into the hotel. The owner was huddled behind the desk and did not cause any trouble while he grabbed the coffin from their room. In a short time he had secured the box to the top of the carriage and the vehicle was heading down the dusty road.

The journey took as long as he'd planned, and they passed through environments which increasingly became wooded. There was only one delay about halfway through the trip, and it involved them both. Just as they had made a good many miles from the town, Will suddenly felt a horrible pain in his chest. At the same time there was a cry in the carriage. Something was wrong with Violet.

"Woah!" Will cried to the horses, and they slowed to a stop. In a moment he was off the box and opening the door to the carriage. Violet was huddled in the corner clutching her stomach.

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"My...my stomach," she gasped out. Will immediately realized what that meant and he jumped inside to seat himself at her side. He pulled down one of his sleeves as her pale eyes pleading looked at him to stop the pain. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"The fledgling hunger," he explained to her. He took one of his nails and pulled it across his wrist. A thin bit of flesh was sliced apart and blood began to slither out. It wasn't as fluid as a human's blood, and the color was almost as black as coal. "You must take some blood. Your own is still in my body and will revive you somewhat."

Violet was emotionally repulsed by the oozing blood, but physically her eyes darkened to a deep red not unlike his own during the fight earlier. He leaned her stiff body against his shoulder and lifted the cut to her mouth. She tried to pull away in disgust, but he insisted and would not let her move away even an inch.

"You must drink this," he firmly instructed her. He knew the feelings she was experiencing. It was a mixture of repulsion along with a hungering need greater than anything a human could understand. There was no way around this. She had to drink. "If you do not, the pain will drive you to madness, or worse."

Violet feared a fate of madness much more than the blood, and, with a great amount of hesitation, she gave a small lick against the wound. The minute the fluid slipped into her mouth her eyes dilated to mere pinpricks. Will wasn't prepared when she suddenly plunged her elongated teeth into his skin and he hissed at the initial pain. Her hands twitched at her sides as though they wanted to wrap around his arm, but he held her too close to himself. Then the pain of her teeth slowly melted into the background as a calming feeling arose within him. The sensation of her suckling his wound was more soothing and thrilling a pleasure than he had ever before experienced. He actually found himself pulling her closer and finding great comfort in the little

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warmth from her body. However, Will knew that they couldn't stay like that forever or she would destroy them both.

"Violet," he softly whispered.

His voice awoke her from her frenzy and her eyes snapped wide open. She paused and then jerked back away from his arm. Her chest was heaving and her pale cheeks were accentuated with a faint red glow of life. Will smiled at the drips of blood which slid down one of her lips. He pulled out a handkerchief and held it out for her to take. "You left some," he teasingly commented.

Violet blushed and took the offered cloth. She quickly cleaned herself, and then she glanced up at his own bloody face.

"Did you need this?" she wondered, and she offered the handkerchief back to him.

"I will have time to clean myself when we reach our destination," he explained. The wound on his wrist was already healing as he pulled down his shirt sleeve. "And since you have lost all of your luggage, think of it as a small gift until we can give replace your lost clothes." He glanced down and her dress was indeed being worn to tear.

"Thank you," she quietly returned clutched the cloth to herself. The young woman glanced out the window of the carriage and could see the changed scenery. "How much farther do we have?" She was a little melancholy from his mention of her abandoned things. "Until we can stop for a time, that is."

"At the end of tonight there is a home we can stop at," Will explained to her. "The owner is an old friend of mine."

Believing she had no more questions, he made to leave the carriage.

"Wait," she pleaded. He paused and turned back to her. "Will I...will I feel that again? That pain?"

"Every time you have not fed within a proper time, but only for the first few weeks. After that time your body acclimates to the hunger and you feel less intensity from the demand," he

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replied. She paled at the thought of experiencing that agony and demanding need again. "You will not need to fear it if I am near," he consoled his young fledgling. "My blood will temper down the need for at least a night." She blushed and turned her face away.

"I see..." she murmured.

Will sighed and again seated himself beside her. He felt as though he were a father trying to comfort his child from a nightmare. Unfortunately, this was one from which she would never awaken until she was destroyed.

"Vampires must drink blood to survive. It is our curse for the gifts this life gives to us," he carefully explained. "You do not need to kill a human to gain enough nourishment, but some sacrifice from them must be done."

"But how can your blood settle this...this hunger?" Violet wondered.

"As your guardian, my blood holds certain properties that give you strength."

"And if I were to drink from another vampire?" she persisted. Will didn't like the direction this was going. She was asking dangerous questions.

"Drinking from another vampire not of your line would destroy you," Will carefully told her. "You must never accept someone else's blood unless you are sure they are human. Do you understand?"

"I think so," Violet hesitated to admit. This was all very confusing to her, but with their bond she could tell he was speaking the truth. "I just don't want to hurt anyone. I don't want to feel any of this pain." Tears were rising to her eyes again, and try as she might she could not keep them from silently spilling over.

"Don't think of it for now," Will suggested, and he lay a gentle hand on her shoulder. He looked into her eyes and smiled. "We have many more nights to discuss such things."

"Yes, I suppose we do," she agreed as she wiped the tears

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away. She managed a small smile in return for his own.

"That's my girl," he proudly complimented. She blushed again, but this time from pleasure.

Will exited the carriage and returned to his seat on the box. The night was well over half gone and they still had some miles to travel before their destination. He called to the horses and they resumed their journey at a hard gallop.

Chapter 5

The two companions were now passed through wooded land with deep green paths. While the dark carriage passed by along the dirt road, small birds nested in the trees and nocturnal hunters slunk into the shadows. Will turned off the main road and onto a narrow, bumpy path. Not many vehicles came this way, as evidenced by the tall grass which grew up in the wheel ruts and the bushes that scraped against the undercarriage. The carriage swayed back and forth, so he was forced to slow their pace the last mile.

Violet gathered enough courage and balance to stick her head out the window. Dark forest greeted her gaze, but she was in time to glimpse the first view of their destination. It was a small, simple cottage built from materials gathered from the surrounding forest. Large, hewn log planks made for sturdy walls and even allowed a second story. A stone path led to a plain door, and flower beds surrounded the front of the house. Little windows allowed natural light from the moon overhead to stream inside, and through the glass candlelight softly glowed a warm greeting.

Will pulled the carriage up to the door and stopped the horses. He jumped down just as the front entrance opened and a slim, tall man stepped out. He had sandy hair and appeared to be about thirty-five years old. There was a bright, friendly smile on his face, especially when he saw Will.

"This is a bit of a surprise," he welcomed. He spoke with a hint of an English accent, one softened by years of living around those of the American dialect. "Your letter said you would not come here for another day or two. Were you so eager to see your old friend?" That's when he got his first full view of Will's face, and he startled back away from the gore on the young man's skin. There was also the burn on his hand from the sun. "My god, Will, what happened to you?"

"Merely some bandits and a close call," Will explained

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while he helped Violet out of the carriage. She smiled at their new acquaintance, and the man gave a flourishing bow at the sudden appearance of the young woman. "They caused some changes to my itinerary."

"But who have we here?" the gentleman wondered in amazement.

"Violet Feld, allow me to introduce you to Mr. James Steady."

"Please call me Jim," he eagerly requested. He took her hand to kiss it, but then his glance caught on her eyes. He sharply turned to Will, but more out of curiosity than anger. "What is this?" he asked his old friend. Violet wondered if she had done something wrong. "Does this young woman have some relation to you?"

"Yes, she is mine," Will explained to him with not a little pride. He couldn't help but smirk at the expense of his dumbfounded friend.

"Well, I must congratulate you on a fine specimen of womanhood," Jim complimented. He kissed her hand and smiled up at her. She blushed, and here did he scowl. "Have you had anything to eat, my dear? You're looking a little too pale, even for us."

"She ate a few miles back," Will chimed in. Violet now paled herself, and glanced away in embarrassment.

"I see," Jim mused as he looked between them. He could guess what had conspired, especially from the blood stained handkerchief in her hand. He straightened and clapped his hands together. "Well, I'm sure I can fix that for your stay here." He suddenly paused and turned to Will. "You are staying, aren't you? At least to wash your face and clothes," he added as he pointed down at the young man's filthy clothes.

"For a few days," the young man admitted. "If you'll have us, that is."

"Have you?" Jim laughed. He stepped up and clapped Will

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on the back hard enough to knock him forward. Violet covered her mouth to hide her laughter. "I wouldn't allow you to leave so soon. This old man is always glad to have such youngsters as company. It makes me feel decades younger."

"That's good to hear," Will seriously replied. His face darkened and Jim noticed. "We had some trouble back there that we would like to forget."

"You fell into trouble around here?" Jim asked with some surprise in his voice. He honestly couldn't believe his quiet, stoic friend had managed to get himself into a row. He gave Violet another look over and solemnly nodded. "Well, I must compliment your tastes in reasons to fight."

"Is the barn still usable?" his old friend wondered. Will nodded at a tall structure a few dozen yards off.

"Everything is just as you left it the last time you were here," Jim defended his establishment. His eyes glanced over to Violet. "I'd ask the young lady if she'd like to join me for a quick drink while you take care of your horses, but I have a feeling she's quite attached to you," he pointedly remarked.

"We'll be right in," Will agreed without directly addressing his friend's comment

"Let me get your coffin, before you find yourself sleeping in the barn," Jim offered.

The box was removed from the top of the carriage and their host disappeared into the house with the load. Will took the reins of the horses, and with Violet following he led them all to the barn. The young lady watched as the fine steeds were put up in the stalls.

"Don't mind Jim too much," he warned his young protege. "He doesn't often have visitors, so he is a little unusual around others."

"I don't mind him," she softly informed her guardian. "He seems kind."

"Probably the most gentle man I've ever known," Will

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agreed as he finished giving feed to the horses. They'd had a long ride, and deserved all the hay they could eat, at least within reason. "Unless, of course, when he's been angered by some injustice."

"How long have you known him?" Violet remembered Will had muttered something about centuries during the confrontation in the last town. She had a hard time grasping that someone so young in appearance could be so ancient.

"A number of decades," her guardian vaguely commented. He turned to her and nodded toward where the house lay. "We had better get inside before Jim worries about you."

"Would he really?" she asked. They had only just met.

"He tends to be very fawning over new vampires," Will informed her. There was a ghost of a smirk on his lips. "And he may spoil you."

Violet smiled and he led her back to the house. The companions paused only to allow Will time to wash his hands and face at the well which stood halfway between the barn and residence. Back at the home, they found their host in the parlor with a large decanter filled with red liquid on the table. Three wine glasses were at the ready.

"I thought perhaps you two would like a quick drink," Jim offered, and he handed two of the glasses to his guests. The third he picked up for himself. "To new opportunities," he honored as he raised his glass. The other two did the same. He downed his in one gulp, but Will only drank a small amount. Violet wasn't sure what to make of the contents, but she wasn't foolish enough to not know what it was. Jim noticed her hesitation. "Don't have any qualms as to the origin. The unsuspecting person is still very much alive."

Violet winced a little at the joke, and then hesitantly took a sip. Her eyes lit up and before she could stop herself she had downed the rest of the contents. Jim laughed but Will appeared worried at her lack of control.

"So how long do you young people intend to visit with this

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old man?" Jim joked as he glanced at Will's damaged hand. "Oh, and I managed to find some extra clothes for yourself, Will, but for Violet I had nothing in her size."

"As I said before, we had some trouble in the town she came from," Will reminded his friend as he put down his glass. "We hope to elude them by staying here for a few days."

"A good idea, it'll give that hand some time to heal," his old friend complimented. He grinned at them both. "Besides, no one would suspect that such an academic hermit such as myself would be harboring a fugitive and his kidnapped victim."

"We can certainly stay long enough to rest and maybe gather some new clothes for Violet," Will added. He glanced over his charge's filthy coverings, and Violet blushed in mortification. "I'm afraid Violet didn't have time to pack for our trip."

"Then I'll have her go see my own tailor," Jim gladly suggested. He perused her dirty clothing with some amusement. "He'll fix her up fine without any questions."

"We would be much obliged for the help," the young visitor thanked. He turned to Violet even as he sensed the approaching sunrise. "It's been a long night. We had better get some sleep." She nodded and set her glass down with a quiet thank you to their host.

"My pleasure, my Lady Violet. Anything for someone as lovely as you," Jim returned with another sweeping bow. "But perhaps you want me to wrap that hand of yours, Will?" their host offered, but his old friend shook his head.

"I think your blood will do the job, so we'll see you tomorrow. Will gave his farewell, and he led Violet out of the room.

Their quarters were in the upper story of the house, so they traveled up the rough wooden stairs to a simple, single hallway. Each side held a room, and theirs was on the right while on the other lay Jim's sleeping area. The two companions found their shared coffin situated in the center of the room, presumably so

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both could easily get in and out of the box. Will removed his shoes and took off his coat for the long sleep. As his friend had promised, Will found a clean shirt and pants hung over a chair. For now he only removed the blood-stained shirt and put on the fresh clothes. Violet shyly stood by, trying hard not to watch him undress.

"Something on your mind?" Will asked his young charge.

"I just...it's..." she stuttered out. Her hands fidgeted with her dress. "Do I need my own, um, sleeping box?"

"Perhaps, but not right now," her guardian countered. He nodded at the windows. They were shut tight with screens so no light would be allowed to get into the room. "Those may be guarded, but for a new vampire nothing is as restful as knowing their guardian is nearby."

"I suppose you're right," she hesitated to agree. Being a nearly-mature woman, and he a mature man, she knew the implications of such close physical contact between them.

"During the sleep neither of us will stir, and only mortal danger will wake us before the next sunset," Will tried to comfort her. He knelt down beside the coffin and opened the lid. In one swift movement he had climbed into the box and made enough room for her to lay down on her side. He then held out a hand for her to take. "I promise you there is nothing to fear from me."

Violet would have protested further, but she could feel the night was getting old. Her eyes were growing weary and her limbs heavy. With a sigh of resignation she took off her shoes and cautiously stepped into the coffin. Her small feet accidentally stepped on his legs, and she couldn't help but twitter with nervous laughter.

"I'm sorry," she profusely apologized. He hardly noticed as she lay down at his side.

The limited coffin width forced her to lay her head down on his chest for the most comfortable position. Will reached out and took hold of the coffin lid. He covered them in the darkness

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and they both shifted slightly to take the best advantage of their positions. They lay there for a long moment in silence before the sun rose above the horizon. Violet allowed herself to lay an arm across Will's chest, and she nervously gripped his shirt. With her ear against where his heart lay, she cringed when she recalled how he had been shot in that exact spot by the gunman. It was also disheartening not to hear the soft thump of his heart.

"I'm afraid you won't find any comfort from my cold chest," Will softly informed her. He had noticed her laying still to listen for a sound which no longer existed. "Nor will your own heart ever give off a beat."

"I was just remembering sitting on my father's lap when I was little," Violet quietly reminisced. She gave a shuddered breath as she tried to hold her tears back. "I would listen to his heart beat until I fell asleep, and then he would always carry me to bed."

"Bellop told me he passed away several years ago," Will replied. He eyes followed the designs on the lid while he had done ages past as she nodded her head.

"He worked for Simeon as a hired hand," she quietly told the story. "Two years ago there was an accident with a wagon, and my father was crushed beneath the wheels."

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine," Violet countered with a shake of her head. There was a bitter smile on her lips. "He wouldn't want me to make myself so unhappy over his passing."

Will was ill-suited to comforting another creature, so he absently began to run his fingers through her long, thick hair. The motion lulled her into the deep slumber and soon she lay as still as she were in the grave. He stayed awake for a few moments longer while he pondered what he had done to this soft flower. He had given this kind-hearted child immortality without thinking over the consequences. After all, she would no doubt not be joining her deceased father for a good number of years. He had to be her family now, and he felt ill-equipped for the responsibility.

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Will fell asleep still pondering that predicament. He didn't have any clear answer for himself, nor did he when he awoke the next night.

It was rather an amusing awakening. A sound reached Will's ears and he grudgingly cracked open his eyes to listen. Apparently their host was downstairs in the kitchen loudly humming an unknown tune. He sighed at his old friend's strange ways, and that's when he noticed Violet still slept atop him. She still clutched onto his shirt, and he smiled when he was able to glimpse the quiet expression on her face.

"Time to wake up, Violet," he softly whispered.

Violet stubbornly tried to cling to sleep, but unbidden her eyes opened. She blushed when she noticed how physically close they lay together. Will lifted the lid and assisted her out of the coffin. Once she stepped out, he himself stood. Their toiletries were simple, though Violet on her own volition turned away when Will removed his old pants and fit himself into Jim's gift of clothes. Will also checked on his hand, and found the wound completely healed. There would never be any evidence it had ever occurred. Then the companions made their way downstairs and found their host in the kitchen preparing their 'breakfast.' Candles lit the room to give the space a more comforting feeling for his two guests.

"Good evening, young ones," Jim greeted his guests. He had already placed clean glasses on the kitchen table and was just choosing the drink from a variety of bottles. "I can't seem to decide what to, um, cook for us tonight," he joked. He rubbed his chin and his eyes lit up before he pulled out a dark green bottle. "This one should do well. Bottled only last spring, though over a period of a few days," he reassured them. He poured one glass and handed it to Violet. "For our gorgeous flower."

She smiled and gladly accepted the offer, if only to avoid the pain caused by the hunger.

"There's something I'd like to ask Will for a moment," Jim

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told them while he filled the final two glasses. "Would you mind, Violet, if I took your guardian for a moment?"

"No, I'll be fine," she replied. Will for his part wondered what this was about, and so he curiously followed his friend into the parlor. Jim shut the door behind them, and the vampires comfortably stood in the dark room.

"I must ask how you came to be with such a startling beauty," his friend eagerly questioned.

"Fate," Will answered with an indifferent shrug.

"As a man of science, I'm not sure I can take that as an answer," his host philosophically countered. Will tried not to laugh. The idea of science taking any precedence in their unnatural lives was ludicrous.

"Then I have no answer to give to you," Will countered. He could no more explain the pull of the Blood Moon on himself than he could why their kind existed in this world. "Your curiosity will have to remain dissatisfied."

"That's hardly a fair thing to do to your host," Jim scolded as he folded his arms across his chest. "Particularly since I recall a certain vampire vowing he would never take on an apprentice."

"It was hardly my doing," Will argued in frustration. "There was a Blood Moon several nights ago, and she was at my side when the instincts took me."

"A Blood Moon?" Jim repeated. One of his eyebrows raised in interest. "You know those appear as an omen for our kind."

"I had spoken of fate," Will mischievously reminded his old friend.

"I suppose you have me there," Jim agreed with a hearty laugh. "There certainly isn't an explanation for that moon phenomenon."

Their conversation would have continued had the companions not suddenly heard a crash come from the kitchen. They hurriedly returned to the room to find Violet standing beside

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the table. The girl's arms were held out in front of her and her hands were shaking. On the floor before her feet lay the shattered remains of the bottle. Will didn't need her to speak to know her hunger had overtaken her, and she had downed the bottle. In her eagerness, it had no doubt slipped from her fingers.

"I-I'm sorry," she stuttered out. She was trying her hardest not to cry out of sheer frustration and fear. "I didn't mean to drop it."

"Well, at least we needn't worry about her unintentionally attacking the tailor," Jim amicably quipped. Will scowled at him so strongly that Jim took a defensive step back. "Perhaps I'll prepare my horses for our short journey." He quickly removed himself from their company and left Will to deal with his young, scared protege.

"Perhaps we had better clean up the glass," Will suggested, and he grabbed a broom which had been leaning against a wall. Jim had no doubt been cleaning the kitchen prior to their waking.

"Please let me," Violet pleaded. "I made the mess, after all."

"If you wish." She nodded and Will handed her the broom. There was no liquid on the floor, she had made sure of that before the bottle had slipped through her fingers. He watched her sweep the fragments into a neat pile before he spoke to her again. "Are you still thirsty?" Violet paused and shuddered.

"No," she quietly replied. She was staring down in shame at the ground, and Will waited for her to work her way through her frustrations. She couldn't force herself to look into his stern face. Her grip on the broom handle tightened as she closed her eyes and clenched her teeth. This was so frustrating to her. "I couldn't stop myself."

"I believe you," Will kindly answered. She glanced up and found his expression was softened by the fear and confusion in her eyes. "The hunger is impossible to describe, and nearly as

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difficult to control for someone as newly reborn as yourself."

"How long will it be before the hunger subsides?" Her sweet voice was soft and trembling.

"The time is different for everyone," her guardian told her. He neglected to mention that through his own personal experience the process had taken several years. Instead he smiled at her with a twinkle in his eye. "Perhaps you will be able to control yourself in a century or so."

Instead of the joke merely falling flat or getting a weak laugh, her face dropped and her eyes widened in horror. Her hand shook so much that the broom rattled in her grasp. He realized the error in naming such a large expanse of time.

"So long?" she quietly asked. "We truly live for so long?" He had nothing else to tell her but the truth.

"We can, and many more live for longer periods," he regretted to inform her.

"How...how old are you?"

Will wasn't sure how to softly inform her of his age. He was so old that he often forgot how many years had passed, and several decades ago he had merely began to remember the year of his birth. Thankfully Jim interrupted their uncomfortable discussion as he strode into the kitchen.

"What? Still cleaning up?" their host teasingly wondered when he noticed the pile upon the stone floor. "I suppose we'll have to finish the job later," he suggested to them, and he herded his guests out the door. "My tailor generally dislikes taking measurements in the dark, but much later and he may not answer the door no matter how loudly we knock."

Outside his small wagon awaited them. It was made of simple wood from the surrounding forest, and could only seat two in the back with another as driver on the small, narrow box in front. A single chestnut horse was hitched to the vehicle. Violet blushed when the cramped space forced her arm to brush up against Will's own limb. Jim made sure his companions were

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comfortable before he mounted the coach box. He turned back to flash a grin at his guests.

"You two look very well as a couple," he teased.

"I suggest you drive," Will advised as Violet's face further reddened.

"I couldn't have spoken better myself," Jim agreed. He cracked the whip and the horses clomped down the road.

Chapter 6

Violet watched the passing countryside with interest. Will could tell she still struggled to see through the darkness, but that would be remedied in time. The short distance to the tailor's house was quickly covered, and the wagon soon came to a halt in front of a simple but clean cottage. A light shone in the front window.

"One moment and I'll see if he's available," Jim instructed his guests. He hopped off the box and strode up to the door. There he knocked with a familiarity which showed he often frequented the business. An older gentleman with bespectacled eyes answered the call and smiled at his guest.

"Good evening, Mr. Steady," he politely greeted as he adjusted the frames of his glasses. "What brings you here?"

"I have friends come to visit, Mr. Tyler," Jim briskly explained. "One of them is a fine lady in great need of new clothes. She lost her luggage on the journey, you see."

"Always happy to oblige a paying customer," the old gentleman pointedly remarked. Will imagined the man received a lot of money for his tight lips in regards to Jim's strange, nocturnal habits. "If you would all like to come inside, I would be happy to take the lady's measurements." Jim turned to the carriage and gave a nod to his friends.

Will stepped out of the carriage and helped Violet to alight. They entered the house and the two companions looked around with interest. The place was a mess. Fabric littered the ground and covered every flat surface from tables to chairs. String hung in large balls from the ceiling and boxes of needles lay next to scraps of paper with numbers and drawings written all over the surface.

"If the lady will step this way for some privacy, I can take her measurements," the tailor instructed, and he gestured to a small room off the main area. She hesitantly followed, and the man closed the door behind them.

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"So you believe the Blood Moon chose her as your guarded?" Jim wondered in a tone low enough it would not be heard through the door.

"You will be the first to know should I find the answer," Will returned.

"I know you too well to believe you would carelessly attack a young woman, and then become her guardian," his old friend commented. He glanced over to the closed door. "Though whatever your motives, you certainly picked a rose in bloom." Will uneasily shifted against the wall, though more out of unease with his young protege in a shut room than from the compliment by his friend. "Well, regardless of your internal struggles, where are you two headed?"

"To the east," Will vaguely explained. "Perhaps my guardian has answers to my questions."

"That would be the best route," Jim agreed with a solemn nod of his head. "He seems to have all the answers anyone has ever asked."

"My questions won't be that complicated," Will pointed out. "I merely need instructions on how to proceed with Violet."

"Well, you don't seem to be doing that bad of a job," his old friend commented. He lifted his hand and rubbed his chin between his fingers. "She's a little frightened, though. Has she always been this nervous?"

"I knew her only a few minutes before I took her," Will hastily remarked. Jim smiled at the other man's admission.

"Then you two will have quite a bit to speak about during the remainder of your journey."

The door to the interior room suddenly opened, and the tailor stepped out.

"The lady is ready to choose her dresses, but I think she might want some opinions from you gentlemen," Mr. Tyler explained in some vexation. It was apparent he'd been having trouble getting her to decide what fabric she wanted the dresses to

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be made from. His last hope was to turn to the young men and have them give their appraisal.

Will inaudibly sighed, but Jim was all smiles as they stepped into the room. Like the front area, this space was packed with fabric materials and sewing tools. Candles were strategically placed throughout the room to allow the tailor to work. They found Violet standing nervously on a stool in the center of the small room, stripped to her under-drawers. She looked absolutely mortified to have the men come inside, but the tailor was unperturbed by her shyness.

"These gentleman are your friends, I'm sure they'll help you choose," Mr. Tyler consoled her. He picked up a few pieces of sample fabrics.

"I-I'll just have the yellow and white ones," she quickly agreed. For his part, Will looked relieved at not having to help her choose. Jim, however, wasn't going to let the poor girl so hastily decide for herself.

"Nonsense, my dear lady," Jim argued. He plucked the samples from the tailor's hands and held them up against Violet's pale skin. She was absolutely livid at the close contact. "I think both of these colors would match you perfectly," he mischievously complimented. His blue eyes darted over to where Will stood near the door. "What say you, Will? Do these compliment your young protege?" Violet's eyes opened slightly in interest at his opinion.

"Perfectly," he blandly replied without taking a look. Violet's face fell at his indifference, and he sighed again in vexation. Grudgingly Will stepped over and looked at the colors. "They will work." Violet smiled at his efforts, and Jim winked at her.

With measurements in hand, the tailor could begin his work the following day. Violet was to have two new dresses made, one in case of damage to the other. They could have a finer tailor make more when they reached their final destination.

"When can they be finished?" Will asked before they

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prepared to depart.

"Well, I don't know..." Mr. Tyler hesitated. He swept his hand over many half finished orders strewn about the room. Many were of women's dresses for the upcoming holiday seasons. "It may take as long as a week or two, unless I can hire an assistant for the short time." He pointedly stared at the gentleman.

"Very well, then," Will agreed. He produced his bag of coins and set some of them into the man's hand. "Be done in a single day and I shall pay you as much upon receipt."

"The work shall be done, good sir," the tailor respectfully bowed.

Their order taken and nothing more to do there, they bid the man farewell and stepped out into the night. The tailor's home was not far off the main road, and just opposite the house was a wide, well-kept path which led into a few acres of thick woods. Jim took a deep breath of the still, cool air.

"He runs a hard bargain sometimes, but he generally keeps his word," Jim noted to his two friends. "He'll no doubt hire an assistant and get your dresses done in ample time."

"He must, otherwise it will be a longer delay than I had anticipated staying here," Will countered. He had hoped for their visit to end early tomorrow evening, but they would need to pick up the dresses and try them on tomorrow to make sure they suited her well enough.

"Well, Violet must have new clothes, and that gives us the rest of this night for more pleasant enjoyments," his old friend countered. He glanced up at the clear night sky. "Such as this perfect night, for example. In your rush to get to your destination you might have missed it." He turned to his two companions. "Would you'd like to go for a stroll? That would allow me to show you the majestic beauty of this place."

"For another visit, Jim," Will replied. Even with the apparent peace in the area, he still felt the distance from their last fight with Simeon's men was too close. "We don't want to be

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seen."

"You really haven't been telling me all I need to know, have you, Will?" his old friend scolded.

"I had hoped we would be away from here before it would be necessary to tell you everything," Will countered, alluding to the interval between now and when the dresses would be finished. Jim gave him a scolding look.

"Then I suppose now is as good a chance as ever."

Neither of them in their distracted bickering noticed nor cared when something flitted through the shadows just beyond the road. However, Violet noticed the white thing. Curiously she stepped aside the two men and traveled across the road. In the bushes close by the path she knelt down and found what had caught her attention. It looked like an old orange and white cat. The little thing was snooping around the ground, no doubt looking for that night's dinner.

"Hello, little kitty," she cooed at the feline. The cat turned and swished its bushy tail at her calling. Cautiously the young woman held out her hand. "Are you hungry?" Surely there was some food in Jim's home which they could share with the little cat.

The ears of the feline twitched in interest and it boldly stepped forward within her reach. She smiled and stretched out her hand to pet its soft, silky hair. There were patches of fur missing, which told of a hard life out in the wild. The ears, too, had small pieces taken from the edges as though bitten off in many fights.

"Violet?" Will called out to her. He'd noticed her wander away from them and hadn't stopped her. Now, though, he felt something amiss in the woods near where she stood. "Come away from there."

Violet was confused by his worried voice until she heard an almost imperceptible sound in front of her. She cried out when a pale hand shot out from the bushes and tried to grab the front of her dress. Her surprise caused her to fall back, and the cat before

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her suddenly jumped up and bit her attacker on the palm. Another hand reached out and grabbed the feline, and the thing let out a yell of fear and fury. Will was at her side the next moment and he pulled her against him. Jim, too, was at her side to fend off this new threat.

Then from the bushes stepped an older man. He appeared to be about Jim's age, but his clothes were unkept and his long, brown hair was unruly. He held the screaming cat in one hand as the poor thing tried to claw its way free of his harsh grasp.

"Good evening," he greeted with a flourishing bow. The cat violently hissed at him and he wickedly laughed. "Not quite the snack I've been looking for, but it'll work."

"Don't hurt it!" Violet exclaimed as she tried to pull herself free from Will's grasp. Her companions and the stranger were surprised by her outburst, but she didn't care. "Please don't hurt it!"

"Wanting it for yourself, little missy?" the stranger questioned. The old orange puffball hissed and tried to give his face a good swipe, but unfortunately missed. "It's pretty feisty. You might want to let me get a bite of it before you do."

Violet cringed back at his suggestion, and Jim stepped forward.

"What brings you here, stranger?" he politely inquired. This person was one a vampire, but he didn't like the look of him at all. He appeared to be of the desperate type, what with his shifty eyes and worn clothes.

"Just passing through and thought I'd stop for a little bite to eat," he joked. He swung the cat back and forth a bit, and the poor creature's feet futilely scratched at the air. Violet stepped forward, but Will blocked her with his arm. "Unless you gents happen to have something tastier in mind."

"It's best to be discreet in such a small community," Jim quickly pointed out. Will and he both knew their unwelcome companion was referring to attacking a human, and Will could

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understand why his old friend was disgusted with the stranger's rash words. At best, any such stupidity would lead to him expelled from the area. "Perhaps you had better pass through here quickly." His statement could be taken both as a threat or as sage advice. Their new acquaintance chose the former.

"What you mean by that?" he growled at them. His grip unconsciously tightened on the cat, and the thing piteously mewed. "There's no rules saying I can't stay here if I want."

"No, but your kind is not welcome," Jim bluntly commented. He didn't feel the need to be tactful any longer.

"Putting on airs now, are we?" the stranger charged. He spat onto the ground. "That's what I think of you and your rules."

Will sensed trouble brewing and tried to push Violet back, but she wouldn't budge. She wouldn't leave without that poor creature, who was even now being cruelly jostled in the stranger's hand.

"It's merely a request, friend," Jim firmly objected. His body was tensing for a brawl.

He wasn't disappointed as the stranger threw the cat to one side and charged at him. Violet broke passed Will and caught the cat before it hit the ground even as the two vampires tussled in the background. She clutched the scared feline to herself and turned to watch the two men, but she couldn't follow their swift movements. Fearfully she backed up from the fight only to have them come crashing toward her.

Will grabbed her and pulled her to the side just in time to escape getting into the mix. However, the fight was soon broken up by a quick fist punch by Jim which sent his adversary into a tree. Violet was shocked to see the trunk crack from the force and bark fly in every direction. The stranger was back on his feet in a moment but now he wasn't so sure about his abilities.

"You think you wanna try that again?" he challenged, but the impact with the tree had taken most of the fire from his threat.

"Perhaps you'd like to try us both?" Will countered as he

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stepped up beside Jim. The stranger didn't like his odds one bit.

"Maybe I don't think you're worth it," he muttered. He took a few cautious steps back as his narrow eyes looked around the group. "Just make sure not to mess with me again."

Violet blinked and then the man was suddenly gone. Her companions, however, had seen him dash away into the forest. The group was quiet for a moment while they each pondered the problem that had just sped off out of sight.

"I didn't realize I had such interesting characters around," Jim joked to break the silence. A soft mew caught the men's attentions, and they turned to see Violet still holding cat. The feline was perfectly comfortable in her arms, as evidenced by the loud purring emanating from the cat. "And it appears I have another guest to feed."

Will walked up to his young charge and the old feline, and he gingerly petted the cat. His eyes turned up to look into Violet's face.

"Are you sure you want to keep it?" Will asked. He could see she had an attachment to the creature, no doubt because the cat probably felt as lost as she herself did. She nodded and brightly smiled, and he sighed. It seemed he was stuck with the furry creature as a companion, at least for a time. Pets never lasted long around vampires. He glanced at his old friend. "Perhaps we've had enough adventure for one night."

"Agreed," Jim eagerly noted.

They made the short trip back to the carriage, and from there back to his home for a nice rest.

The stranger the group had met, who went by the name of Nicolas Emilian, watched them leave from a safe distance in the woods. He rubbed his sore bruises and mumbled words of revenge as he moved away from the brush. With slow steps he traveled his way along the road for a few miles, unknowingly in the same

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direction Will and Violet had come. There was no place he called home, and so he had no place to which to hurry. He'd been a wanderer for much of his demonic existence, particularly after having parted ways with his blood guardian. There was much he enjoyed from the wandering life and he never regretted avoiding a settled life of boredom and false face in front of humans. They were just snacks for him, anyway, something from which to take his repast every night. He had no qualms about draining them dry, either, and any sort of settling would certainly find him in dire straights by the local populace when the bodies were discovered.

After so many miles of thick silence along the empty road, Nic's attention was caught by the sounds of a wheeled vehicle coming up the road toward him. He was interested when he noticed it was a carriage of a very nice refinement pulled by two black horses. There was something about their eyes, though, that caught him off guard and rather than jump the carriage for a repast, which he had planned to do, he stepped off to the side to allow it room.

Much was his surprise when the vehicle slowed to a stop in front of him and the two animals glanced over to him with a recognition of one kindred race to another. They had been turned into vampires. Atop the box was a human, an odd driver for such a demonic pair of horses. Then a thin man with dark eyes and a pale complexion leaned out of the carriage, and seated beside him was a portly vampire.

"Good evening, sir," the lean gentleman greeted.

"I suppose so," Nic returned with suspicion. This person was of his own kind, and he no doubt wanted more than a simple conversation. He was also curious to find so many vampires in such a small locale. Generally they kept apart to attract less attention.

"My associate and I were in search of a man just like yourself. Wait, hold a moment." Emilian had prepared himself for a quick escape, as he was rarely wanted for any good reason to

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himself. "We only bring a message from an old acquaintance." The vampire pulled a letter from his coat and handed the envelope to Emilian. He tore it open and peered at the contents, then frowned.

"Why's he wanting to see me again?"

"As it says in the letter. He has certain questions he wishes to ask about the pottery you sold him. There is also another favor I wish to ask you personally, should you decide to come with us willingly." Emilian paled at the veiled threat, but nodded for the thin gentleman to continue. "We were also wondering if you could help us," the stranger continued, and Nic frowned. He disliked people who asked for favors, unless it was him asking, of course. "We are trying to find one of our kind, a young man who appears to be twenty-five. He stands at an average height and has dark hair." Nic was surprised when the description roughly matched one of the men he had just fought. His expression did not go unnoticed by the other vampire. "I see you know something. Care to share us where you met the young gentleman?"

"And if I tell you, what's in it for me?" Nic wondered. He would have no risk without a decent reward.

"Well, there is this gentleman we met on the road," the thin man commented as he leaned back. Revealed at his side was a man of about thirty wearing the tin star of a deputy on his coat. The deputy's arms were strapped to his sides and his mouth was full of cloth to stifle any screams. "We will insist on your coming with us, but perhaps you would take this gentleman, and many others, in exchange for leading us to the gentleman?"

"With pleasure, sir," Nic replied as he eagerly rubbed his hands together in joy.

The door to the carriage was opened and Nic stepped inside. Then it continued on its journey.

Chapter 7

When they returned to the cozy home, both Jim and Will were wary of their surroundings. Will didn't go inside the house until his old friend had returned from the barn. Violet felt his anxiety and nervously held the purring cat in her arms while they waited. The little thing seemed to know it had been saved from a horrible fate and was quite content to lay nestled against her chest. When the three were ready they made their way into the home. Violet's eyes flitted around at the fine furniture and curious items strewn about the house, and she hugged the cat tighter to herself. She wasn't sure whether letting him in the house was a good idea, but she didn't want him to run away. Jim saw her indecision and nodded up the stairs.

"Show him the bedroom where you two are sleeping," Jim suggested with an inviting smile. "He can stay there for a while until we figure out if he will run away." She smiled, nodded and clambered up the stairs. Jim cast a glance at Will. "Was she this quiet when you met her?"

"Somewhat," Will admitted. He didn't want to talk about any negative effect from her change, but his friend was insistent.

"So I'm guessing she was the opposite," he persisted in his questions. The lack of an answer from his companion showed him he wasn't too far off, but then a mischievous smile spread across his lips. "You think maybe the Blood Moon has a sense of humor?" he mused. Will stared at him with a brow raised in question, and Jim's shoulders slumped. "Perhaps she's here to give you something to smile about. You're far too grim for even our kind."

"My personality doesn't need changed," Will heatedly argued as he leaned against a nearby wall. They could hear Violet playing with the old cat upstairs, so their conversation was safe. "And she was merely an accident, a force of fate."

"So you're trying to avoid admitting you lost control?" Jim

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guessed. Will shot him a dark glare. "I won't mince words with you, William Stewart. You lost control of your feeding."

"You needn't rub salt into the wound," he angrily shot back. Jim took the hint that any further discussion on this topic would only lead to a fight. He hadn't cleaned the dirt off the last one with that stranger.

"Well, I suppose Caleb might be able to help you here," he guessed as he sat down in one of the comfortable parlor chairs. He was referring by name to Will's own guardian.

"Possibly," Will admitted. "I can think of no one better to turn to."

"Well, yes, I suppose he would be more knowledgeable about such things." Jim glanced around and thoughtfully rubbed his chin. "Perhaps it's high time I caught myself someone to guard," he mused. Will looked to him with a raised brow, and Jim laughed. "Can't an old man dream of having children around the house?"

"I hardly think you would be able to handle anyone younger than a century."

"I object to that statement," Jim shot back in false indignation. "I have done a wonderful job with your new, young protege." Then his expression took a darker turn and his eyes glanced out one of the windows. "But what of this business with the stranger? You know how rarely we find our own kind wandering around."

"Perhaps it's nothing at all," Will suggested, but he didn't sound convinced by his own words.

"But he could be with that other group Caleb and you have had trouble with in the past," Jim pointed out.

"Then all the more reason we should hurry along," Will noted.

"Yes, well, I certainly saw with my own eyes that trouble is following you quite stubbornly," Jim commented. They both glanced up as light footsteps moved down the stairs. Violet soon

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in the doorway of the parlor with a questioning look on her face. "Something we can do for you, Violet?"

"The cat's hungry," she hesitated to explain.

"Well, we'll have to fix that," Jim jollily suggested. He got up from his chair and passed by her to browse through the cupboards. There was a little rare meat he had on hand to keep up some appearance for the sake of his few neighbors. When he was done preparing a plate, she had a feast to take up to her old kitty and she eagerly removed back to the bedroom. "See?" Jim countered to his young friend when he returned to the room. Will had remained against the wall and watched the proceedings through the door. "A perfect image of a guardian."

"I think you would spoil yours to an early destruction," Will commented, though there was a hint of a smile on his lips.

"Well, what else to do with these infinite riches years of saving has given to us?" he pointed out. He suddenly stretched and glanced out the window. "Merely half the night gone and yet I am tired already," he softly commented. "Perhaps my age is catching up to me."

"Or you need more blood," Will offhandedly suggested.

"Perhaps, but this isn't hunger," he mused. There was a pensive expression on his face William had rarely seen. Every time he had, though, something bad had occurred soon after. My instincts tells me this is something different."

"A larger problem?" Will guessed.

"Perhaps, but I'll have to study the phenomenon further," Jim admitted with a shrug. He sighed as he sat back down. "But weren't we talking about your fledgling's problems?" he recalled. "Did she take well to your memories?"

"She's been unable to access the majority of them as of yet," his young friend grudgingly informed him. The ability for a new vampire to acquire their creator's memories was often taken as an indicator of future potential. The faster the memories took, the stronger the fledgling.

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"Perhaps it's the shock from the change," Jim suggested. He was trying to console his friend, but it was hard to fool himself into believing she would be a capable vampire.

"Perhaps," Will hesitated to agree. There wasn't much hope of a change for her to recall those important memories. He shook his head and pushed off from the wall. "I think perhaps I'll go upstairs," he announced.

He disliked a discussion which tried to analyze the problem. He would rather show action and push off on their journey. They were stuck here, however, until those dresses could be finished. He would have insisted they move on, but Jim was right. The state of Violet's outfit would have aroused attention in any town in which they stopped. Unwanted attention was definitely something he wanted to avoid.

"It wouldn't hurt for you to speak with the girl more openly," Jim commented. "If most of those memories never come to her, she'll have that much more need to rely on what you have to say than what you've done in the past." Will sighed, and turned to his old friend with a heavy expression.

"I suppose you're right," Will agreed.

"How about you start by encouraging her to speak to you using your name," Jim put forth. "I noticed she rarely speaks to you directly. Perhaps that familiarity would help her escape her new nervous disposition."

"I'll try your advice," the young man replied, and then he exited the room.

"Just don't blame me if it goes wrong!" Jim called back. Will waived and walked up the stairs out of sight. Jim leaned back in his chair and smiled while his fingers intertwined with one another. "So stubborn, that young one is," he mused. He suddenly flinched when a stab of pain hit him in the chest, and he rubbed the spot over his still heart. "Dang things are getting worse..." he muttered.

Will reached the second story and noticed the door to their

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room was closed. He cautiously knocked on the wooden entrance.

"Yes?" Violet's soft voice called through the door. He was glad to hear her voice sound so happy.

"It's Will, may I come in?" he requested, and he received an affirmative answer.

Will cautiously opened the door and quickly skirted inside. He wasn't sure where the cat was according to the entrance, and he knew Violet wouldn't want the feline to escape and rampage throughout the house. He found his young protege seated on the floor close to the coffin. To his consternation the aforementioned beast was seated comfortably inside their sleeping box. Its tiny claws were happily digging into the plush padding.

"I tried to get him to stop, but he just keeps doing it," Violet defended herself. She picked up the cat and plopped him down on the floor in front of her, but as she had warned Will, the cat stepped right back into the coffin and resumed his kneading. "He's very stubborn."

"Indeed," Will agreed. He moved over to seat himself in the chair close to the washbasin. His pensive eyes watched her for a long moment and she fidgeted beneath his persistent stare. Finally she turned to him with a nervous smile on her lips.

"Did you need something?" she politely asked.

"Have you been able to see more of my memories?" he wondered, and he was disappointed when she sadly shook her head. "What have you gouged from what memories you have?"

"I'm not really sure," Violet admitted with some regret. She shuddered when she recalled what she did understand. "I just know what we are, and what we need to do to survive."

"So only the basics," Will sighed. He leaned back in his chair and tried to compile a brief list of the most important matters to a vampire. While he was doing this, Violet frowned and glanced up at him. He noticed her open her mouth, and then shut it as though she wanted to ask a question, but was too afraid to go through with it. He decided to take the first step in a conversation.

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"Did you want to ask me something?"

"I just...I can't remember your full name," Violet sheepishly admitted. Will frowned as he thought about that for a moment. He had given her an alias when they had first met.

"The name I gave you earlier was William Holbrook," he explained. "My real name, however, is William Stewart."

"Why do you use two names?" she innocently wondered.

"I use many more than that to keep people from following me," Will informed her. She looked curious at his statement. "We live so long that remaining in one spot for very long or with the same name can lead to complications with humans."

"They would recognize you?" she guessed, and he nodded. "Do you have no place to call home?" she persisted. "No place to return to where you feel safe?"

"There is one place, and that's our destination," her guardian revealed. "My own guardian, Caleb Stewart, has an estate in upper New York where we can stay for as long as we wish."

"Does it have a library?" she asked as her eyes lit up in interest.

"Quite a large one," Will informed her with a nod. "He's an avid reader, and has had many lifetimes to accumulate books."

"I can't wait to see it," she replied with a smile. He returned the gesture with his own grin. It was nice to see that bright look on her face.

That's when he heard a soft mew and looked down at his legs. The cat had left the coffin and was now rubbing its bright orange and white fur against his pants. Violet covered her mouth to stifle her giggle.

"I think he likes you," she informed him.

"Wonderful." The little devil was shedding all over his clothes. Then their host stuck his head in through the partially opened door.

"Will you two be turning in soon for the day?" Jim

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wondered. He paused and stepped inside to glance down at the cat which was even then purring up against Will's leg. The expression of disbelief on his face slowly changed to a smirk. "I see you two are becoming well acquainted."

"Yes, well, this thing doesn't know when it should rightfully be afraid," Will commented. He tried to push the cat away with his foot, but the stubborn thing only leaned against his boot and mewed. Violet and Jim laughed.

"Yes, well, I can see it fears you greatly," their host teased. He stretched and let out a great yawn. "Even if you two youngsters aren't turning in, I think I'll take my rest now. Good day."

"Until tomorrow," Will gave his farewell.

"Um, good day," Violet hesitantly answered. It sounded like a strange way to say farewell for her, but goodnight wouldn't exactly work for them.

Jim left their company, and Will glanced down at the furry beast still rubbing against his leg. Violet noticed the dissatisfied look on his face.

"Is he bothering you?" she worriedly asked him. Without waiting for a reply she scooped up the poor thing and hugged it to herself.

"Not particularly," Will admitted as he brushed aside her concern. There was, however, difficulties he could see in keeping the feline. "Have you thought where the cat will reside when we are asleep?" he asked her. She looked around the room, and he realized she hadn't quite figured out a plan to manage her new charge. "Perhaps we should take him outside."

"What if he runs away?" Violet hugged the cat closer as though she could keep him to herself forever.

"I'm afraid that is something we can't control," Will scolded. This was a lesson she'd have to learn, most especially because she would experience separation many times in her long life. "If he leaves, then you must say goodbye."

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"All right..." Violet whispered. She scooped up the feline and they made their way downstairs. Once they were outside, the young woman set the cat down on the ground. The beast looked around for a moment, and before she could stop him he sprinted away into the brush. Will wondered if it was perhaps for the best. The creature would have a hard time traveling with them. Violet looked at the spot where he had vanished for a long moment and then turned back to her guardian.

"Will it always be like this?" she softly asked. She'd been thrown from her hometown and from everyone she had ever known. In exchange, she'd been thrust into a violent world full of danger, death and partings. "These sad memories building up until there's more of them than happy memories?"

"Every life works that way," Will gently explained. "Our own lives are merely longer than others, and so we experience more of this."

He felt as though he had been keeping up a facade of normality with her these past few nights. Slowly though, with each new violent encounter with humans and vampires alike, Will knew he couldn't stop her from seeing what the long future held for her. For her part Violet still clung to the promise of an average life away from all those horrors. Now as she watched the woods for her furry friend to return to her, tears sprang into her eyes.

"Why did this happen?" she whispered. She half turned to her guardian, desperately searching for an answer. "Why did you choose me?" Will sighed and shook his head.

"I don't know," he replied. It was the same answer he'd given her before for this question, and it made him angry with himself that he could not reply with a different response. "I hope my own guardian will have the answer I can't give you."

"And then what?" Violet persisted. A sad smile slipped onto her face. "Even should we find the answer, what will happen to me?"

"You'll stay by my side until you're ready to leave me,"

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Will carefully explained. He could see she was scared he would abandon her. "I won't leave you alone."

Violet turned away and didn't reply. Instead she wrapped her arms around herself and shivered against the night air. She still wasn't used to the cold air and the still veins in her body. Will stepped toward her and wrapped his arms around her shaking form. She innocently looked up into his face and he smiled back down at her. He wasn't sure if it was their connection, or just simply sympathy for a suffering being, but he felt joy when he was close to her.

"I won't let anything happen to you," he promised as he pulled her close against his chest. "And nothing will happen to me. I've lived many years, and plan to live many more."

"Do you swear by it?" she insisted. She settled her hands on top of his own. "That you won't leave me?"

"Only until you choose to leave," Will gently repeated. "I can't keep you with me forever. That wouldn't be fair to you." She suddenly giggled and looked away in embarrassment. He raised a brow at her sudden turn of humor, and wondered if her sanity had left her. "What is it?"

"I was just thinking how much worse off you are than me," she sheepishly explained. "I've been such a burden to everyone since my father died, and now I'm your burden."

"Well, perhaps I needed more change in my life," he contemplated. Will glanced up at the night sky. "Staring at so many moons and dark skies, one forgets how many weeks, years, and even decades have passed. To have a fledgling is to have an anchor to the world."

"You're really that old, aren't you?" Violet whispered. He nodded without looking at her. "Are there...are there any benefits to being so old?"

"Many physical benefits," he admitted. He noticed she was interested to hear more, if only to distract herself from the costs of this existence. "For one, we gain greater speed and agility."

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"Yes, I can't follow you when you move," his young charge commented. "Are you so fast you can avoid bullets?" He laughed, and she took that as him laughing at her question. She scowled and looked away, but she didn't move from his gentle grasp. "It was a decent question," she defended herself.

"Yes, I must agree I should have expected that," Will agreed after he'd calmed himself. "But I can't move that fast. Rather, I allow the bullets to go through me." Her eyes shot open and she swiveled around to see if he was in earnest.

"How can you do that?" she wondered in astonishment. "The pain must be terrible."

"It can be if the correct bullets are used, but often they are only made from simple lead," he explained to her. "Otherwise, the pain is less than other tortures I've experienced."

"What are the correct bullets?" Violet pointedly asked. Right now she didn't want to know what tortures through which he had gone.

"Silver bullets are very effective against us," Will informed her. "Here, let me show you." Violet frowned when he released her and pulled out his gun. She turned to watch him kneel down on the ground. He opened the chamber and emptied the bullets out onto the grass. Beneath the light from the night sky the bullets shined differently than the usual lead bullets she had seen her entire life. "These are silver bullets," he explained as he pointed at the six objects. She noticed he didn't touch them. "If a vampire is shot in the head or the heart with one of these bullets, they will be destroyed. Otherwise they burn our skin, which causes severe blood-loss and pain."

"So these are made from pure silver?" she wondered as she knelt down at his side.

"Yes, and that makes them less accurate when fired," Will mused. "They're also slower out of the barrel than ordinary lead bullets."

"These much have cost a fortune to have made," Violet

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added with awe in her voice.

Will watched her curiosity with interest. He wanted to see if she would take his warnings seriously. Unfortunately, she reached out to pick up one of the bullets and hissed when her finger touched the silver. She drew her hand back and was shocked to find her skin was burning badly enough to produce a black smoke. Tentatively she cradled it in her other hand and glanced to her guardian.

"We can't touch silver at all?" she asked.

"Not at all," he replied as he shook his head. "It will burn us, and it can destroy us." He reached out and gently took her wounded hand into his own. "The wounds also take blood and time to rejuvenate our skin," he commented as he looked over her burn. It would take a day's rest and some more blood before her finger would be back to full health.

"You knew I was going to do that, didn't you?" Violet slowly accused. A hint of a frown tugged at the edges of her mouth.

"I had to see if you would listen to my warning," he briskly explained. Violet scowled, but she didn't take her hand away. Instead she turned away from her guardian. He was glad the former schoolmarm took lessons as well as she gave them. "You'll need to listen to my advice in the future to avoid such troubles."

"I suppose you're right," Violet grudgingly agreed. She still wouldn't look at him. She felt he'd played a foul game with her innocence and innate curiosity. Will noticed the dark expression on her face and frowned. That wasn't a look he wanted to see on her pale, lovely face.

"Ouch!" the young woman suddenly yelped. She furiously turned to find Will holding his fingers over her own burnt one. He had pinched her wounded skin to force her to look at him. She tried to pull her digit free of his grasp, but he wasn't releasing her. "What are you doing?" she demanded to know. She tugged at her hand again, but he wouldn't release her. "Let go of me!"

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"Not until you start behaving," he teasingly ordered. This challenging back and forth game with his young charge was amusing to him. He hadn't had such an interaction in a very long time, and then he had always been in the role Violet now occupied. "The advice I give you will no doubt save your life one day." He had a bad choice of words in that final sentence.

"Life?" Violet spat out. The dark look on her face intensified, and he was taken aback by the sheer anger hidden beneath her meek posterior. "What sort of life have you given me?" She tried to stand but he held her firmly to the ground. She was evidently growing hysterical, and she roughly tried to pull her arm back. "What kind of a future is this life you say I have now? What am I to do? Where am I to go if you should leave me?"

"I won't leave you," he firmly repeated. "You must believe me."

"Like I believed your good intentions when you first came to me?" she angrily countered. "Did you plan this from the start? Is that what you won't tell me?"

"It was not my choice," Will insisted. He yanked her toward him and she half turned to have her back fall against his chest. Quickly he wrapped his arms around her and held her firm. In this posture she couldn't get away, and he couldn't hurt her. "The Blood Moon chooses for the vampire who they are to take."

"Blood moon?" she repeated as she struggled to break free from his arms. Her efforts were fruitless and she found herself with less energy than before. "What is that?"

"It's a force of nature, or rather a myth of our kind," he explained to her. All vampires knew of the existence of the moon and the effects it supposedly had on their kind, but the effects were rare. Maybe once in five hundred years did one occur, and even then there was no guarantee a new one of their kind would be made from its effects. "An ancient one we vampires revere as a holy sign. The moon turns the color of blood, and those vampires who see it are struck with a desire to create a fledgling. At least,

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that is what is contained in the legends I have heard."

"So you didn't know you would be changing me?" Violet wondered. There was surprise mingled with a strange sort of relief. He hadn't meant to attack her from the beginning. She hadn't been just another human to prey upon.

"That's right," he agreed with a solemn nod of his head. "I was only curious to see what sort of human could exhibit the loyalty your friends showed toward you."

"And were you disappointed?" she hesitated to ask. He pulled her closer and she could feel the vibrations of his chuck against her back.

"Not at all," Will comforted her. "It was very refreshing to see that such innocence still existed in this world."

"Naivety, you mean," she softly corrected him. She hung her head in shame and embarrassment. "I know so little about this world."

"You hardly expected to know more outside of your own home," he pointed out. "I can well remember when none traveled farther than ten miles from where they were born. Now they travel across thousands of miles, transcending both water and earth." Violet looked back into his face. His voice sounded so tired and old. Time marched on and he had been forced into one new generation after another. He sighed and shook his head. "Sometimes fate chooses your path, and you're forced to make the best of it."

They were quiet for a moment as each pondered destiny and choice, that age old idea argument over man's free will versus fate. No one could ever truly be sure their decisions were their own, or something preordained on their path to a certain outcome. Suddenly Will laughed, and the sound rang out across the lawn and into the woods. Violet wondered for a moment if he'd lost his senses.

"Caleb would be very amused to hear me speak such things," he commented. "He would know his poetic way of

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speaking has finally rubbed off onto myself."

Chapter 8

"Are you two going to sit out here all night?" a voice suddenly asked from behind them. They both turned to find Jim standing a few yards off with his arms folded across his chest.

"I thought you'd gone to sleep," Will reminded him.

"Not with such jabberers as you two are," their host teased. He suddenly paused and pointed at the ground in front of them. The bullets were still laying where Will had dropped them. "What strange lesson are you teaching the poor girl now?"

"Merely one of curiosity," the young man informed him. Will let go of Violet and pulled forth a pair of thick work gloves from his coat. His young charge watched in interest as he put on the gloves and carefully picked up the bullets one by one. He placed them back in their respective chambers and shut the gun, which was then placed back in its holster.

"You have some tough lessons," Jim mused. He moved over to them and sat down beside the pair. "And what depressing talk for two who are about to embark on their lives together." Violet blushed at the double meaning to that statement, and Will frowned. "You two should be rejoicing in each other's warm company and enjoying this beautiful night." His hand swept the area around them, and the two had to admit it was a nice night. There was a calm air and a starlit sky.

"You are too much of a romantic, Jim," Will scolded.

"Oh come now, are you going to argue with my truthful assessment?" their host countered with a clicking of his tongue. Then he paused and looked around them. "You seem to be missing one of your group, though," he pointed out. "Has the cat run off already?"

"Yes, he left," Violet sadly informed him. She felt childish in attaching such great affection to a small creature, but she had hoped to use him as an emotional anchor. Something she could rely on to comfort her during some of these long, countless nights.

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"Well, perhaps he'll be back," Jim encouraged her. He glanced over to Will, and there was a fake frown on his lips. "I'm sure she'll enjoy that abomination Caleb has guarding his grounds."

"You still harbor ill feelings toward Samson?" Will wondered. "That was a long time ago."

"Yes, well, I swear that thing wounded me for the rest of my lives," Jim playfully whined. He rubbed his posterior. "I'm reminded of it most every night when I have a chance to sit down."

"What is Samson?" Violet wondered as she glanced between the two men.

"He's a beast of hell," Jim explained to the young woman. A deep, joking warning crept into his words and his voice lowered to barely above a whisper. "Otherwise known to the less enlightened as a mastiff hound. The ugliest creature to ever wander the earth, aside from our unwelcome friend earlier this evening."

"Samson useful in scaring off intruders," Will defended the beast.

"He's a menace to perfectly friendly vampires, too," their host countered. He turned to Violet for sympathy as he recounted his tale. "Here I am being perfectly reasonable in giving them a surprise visit, and out of the bushes of the grounds springs the dog of Hell. I tried to escape, but he was much too fast. In a moment he had me by the, well, seat of my pants."

"You thought to spring on us unawares," Will pointed out as Violet laughed at Jim's story. "Samson dislikes surprises."

"Yes, well, at least Caleb was kind enough to call him back when you heard my screams," Jim mused with a sheepish grin on his face.

"He's hardly the sort of gentleman to leave a defenseless creature writhing in pain," the young man wryly commented.

"What is he like?" Violet suddenly interrupted them. The two men glanced at her and she shrank from their attentions.

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"Caleb, I mean."

"Well, I can safely say you'll never find a nicer gentleman," Jim boasted with a grin. "When he finds out Will's made him a grandfather, I imagine you'll be showered with gifts." Will scowled when he heard his friend speak those words, but Violet was amused. Jim gestured at her neck and the top of her head. "You'll be showered with diamonds and rich satin clothing!" He paused in his joy and pondered that for a moment. "Hmm, maybe that's not a good idea," he added while he glanced at her small physique. "I'm not sure you could walk around with all that weight." Will rolled his eyes and he shook his head. They both knew her strength, once she mastered it, would be enough to hold up far more weight than any fabric or jewels could bare.

"Perhaps it's time for all of us to retire," Will suggested. The night was getting old now and the sun would return within the hour. Even now there was a tinge of light coming from the east. He reluctantly released Violet from his hold and helped her to her feet. As Jim stood, Will noticed his old friend was a little slow on moving. "You're sure you're all right?" he asked with not a little concern.

"Yes, I just need some rest," their host reassured him as he stretched and gave a yawn. "Nothing like a long day's sleep to get the heart, well, soul moving again."

Violet perked up and appeared to take comfort at Jim's words. She had suspected they truly were the spawn of the devil, and her soul had been taken from her to keep her from dying. Will noticed her relieved expression, and when they had returned to their room he asked her about it.

"You seemed interested when Jim mentioned his soul," Will wondered as he removed his shoes while she did the same.

"I thought perhaps mine had been taken from me," she told him with some embarrassment. She was getting so many ideas wrong about her new life. "But I suppose the idea of a soul may not be true after all."

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"Actually, in a way it was taken," her guardian admitted. She paled as she lifted her eyes to stare at him with shock and terror. "The way a guardian connects with their guarded is to transfer memories of their vampiric abilities," he reminded her. "But there is a mutual connection created when the new vampire transfers their soul into their guardian through their blood."

"So...so you have my soul?" she stuttered out. She slowly lowered herself to the floor, otherwise she was afraid the shock would cause her to collapse.

"Yes, for safekeeping," Will explained to her. "When you're ready to go out on your own, your soul reconnects with your physical form and our bond is released."

"I can't get it back sooner than that?" Violet almost pleaded with him. She was downfallen when he shook his head.

"The soul chooses the time," he insisted as he stood from his chair. Since the hour was growing so late and they needed to retire soon, he tried to keep his voice as calm as possible. It wouldn't do for both of them to try to sleep together with a heated conversation between them. "You can't rush your progress."

Violet sighed and turned away from him toward the coffin. Outside the rays of the sun were more than hinted at as the day threatened to dawn. Will stepped over to his charge and gently took hold of her shoulders.

"Come, it's time to sleep," he softly insisted.

Violet nodded and Will slid into the coffin first. She uneasily lay on her side again and her head lay against his chest with her hand just above his waist. He closed the lid while the sun was rising in the far distance. In complete darkness once more, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders to provide her with some comfort. The young girl sighed and closed her eyes. No matter how angry or scared of this person who had taken so much and given so little to her, she couldn't remain mad at him forever. There was that connection between them which she could hardly fathom, but which transcended any quarrels small or large between

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them.

"Will?" she softly whispered. He was surprised by her familiarity. She hadn't called him that since she'd been changed.

"Yes?" he whispered in return.

"What does one do as a vampire?" she wondered. "I mean, we live for so long, what do we do? Do we take occupations that lead us from one town to another? Can we raise families and meet friends, only to lose them when they grow old and we remained young?"

"Our family and friends are those vampires who we trust," he thoughtfully replied. "To know any human is to know they will leave us one day." A smirk spread across his lips when he recalled her first question, though she could not see it in the darkness. After all, he was still a male and vampires, too, felt the impulse of sexual needs. "And as for what may preoccupy our time, the possibilities are endless."

"Where did you begin?" Violet innocently asked him, and she turned her head to look up at him.

"I was a very stupid boy when I was turned," Will sheepishly admitted. "My guardian thought it best to educate me according to the times."

"So you were allowed to go to school?" she persisted. "And then what did you do after that?"

"I traveled with Caleb until we grew tired of conflict and settled down on his new estate in the colonies," he finished. "When my training was finished and my soul returned, I traveled alone and met more of our kind."

"You must have seen so much in your travels," she wondered in a voice filled with awe. She could only imagine the places he had seen, compared to those wonderful cities she had only heard and read about. She fidgeted a little when a question came to her mind. "Will you...will you do the same for me? Take me to these places?"

"I would be a poor guide in this new world you belong if I

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didn't," he replied with a chuckle.

Violet smiled and snuggled closer to her guardian. For the first time she felt some excitement at the coming night, and the countless ones after that. With that feeling of joy she fell asleep beside him, but he stayed awake for a while yet. He could promise those wonderful adventures, but there would still be that bittersweet joy of living for an eternity while others would not. He sighed. Perhaps his guardian would give him some advice to deal with such an emotional fledgling.

Then Will drifted off into the waiting slumber, and neither he nor his young one awakened until the sun had set well beyond the horizon. Indeed Jim came up to see what was keeping them. As he stood over the closed coffin, he playfully knocked on the wooden side.

"Are you two planning on staying in there all night?" Jim teased. After a moment the lid opened and Will's face held a scowl. Violet's cheek blushed from the embarrassment, but the color lacked strength. She needed blood. "Perhaps you two sleepers would like to get up for some food?" Jim wondered.

"We'll be down in a moment," Will pointedly told him as he sat up. Violet moved with him and Jim helped her up from the box.

"Then I'll get the food ready," their host offered, and in a wink he had disappeared.

Violet put on her shoes while Will rose and clothed himself. They were finished in a thrice and went downstairs to find their friend most preoccupied with something at the kitchen door. Jim knelt down and stared at something which curled itself around his bent legs. He turned at their coming and had a large grin on his face.

"It appears you've made a lasting companion," he commented, and he moved away for them to see what he was talking about.

Violet's face lit up with joy as she glimpsed the old orange

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cat from the previous night. It noticed her and strode up to her with its tail swishing in the air. It gave a mew of delight as it twined itself around her legs. She knelt down and happily scooped it up into her arms, and the cat purred even louder. The young girl turned to her guardian with tears of joy in her eyes.

"May I keep him?" she pleaded.

"I don't think you two have a choice," Jim interrupted. "Once a cat's chosen its humans, or in this case its vampires, there's no escaping their furry demands."

"He won't have an easy life with us," Will reminded his young charge.

"He looks like he's used to that," Violet answered as she looked over his patched fur. Will sighed and shrugged.

"Well then, I suppose we have no choice." A bright smile spread across her face and before either of them knew what had happened, she'd wrapped an arm around him and hugged herself to her guardian.

"Thank you so much!" the young girl replied. Will blushed and Jim couldn't help but laugh at his old friend's embarrassed expression.

"You have quite the admirer there now, Will," Jim teased.

"The admiring will have to wait," he hastily replied. Will wasn't used to such admiration, particularly coming from a young woman. "We should see if her dresses have been prepared."

"Actually, there's no need," Jim informed him. He stepped into the parlor and motioned for them to follow. When they entered they saw two neatly wrapped packages laying on the large coffee table. "Mr. Tyler had them sent over by his new assistant, and I sent the boy back with the other half of the payment."

"You know I would have gladly paid the expense," Will scowled.

"Just think of it as a present to your charming charge." Jim turned to the girl who eagerly eyed the packages. "Feel free to have a look at them. To be honest, I'm curious how they turned

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out."

Violet gently put down her kitty and stepped over to her gifts. She carefully unwrapped them and her mouth opened into a wide smile at the beautiful mix of white and lavender on one dress, and sky blue and white on the other. She looked to her guardian.

"May I try them on?"

"You'd better, or we may find out later they do not fit," he sensibly replied

Violet dashed upstairs with her precious dresses and the cat eagerly followed her, trying its best to catch a few loose ribbons floating behind. The men watched her leave, and then Jim turned to his old friend.

"What will Caleb think of her? She is very young to be one of us."

"Sadly, I believe your description of his reaction may not be far from the truth," Will answered with a shake of his head. "He has been dropping hints these last few decades about having more youth in our bloodline rather than, well, me."

"You have grown pretty crotchety in your old age," Jim commented with a frown. He looked Will's form over with a shake of his head and a click of his tongue. "You hardly ever visit me, and I've heard you're handling the majority of Caleb's assets."

"Well, he needs help," Will countered. "I caught him buying a castle in Ireland he remembered watching be built. He said it would be his getaway when the Hunters came for him, because it had a moat and drawbridge still intact."

"You have to admit castles are a more rare commodity than when we were younger," Jim pointed out. If looks could kill Jim would have been destroyed with the expression on Will's face.

"Yes, well, he allows me to handle most of his affairs, and he keeps enough money to entertain his interests."

"If I recall, he did have the finest collection of tapestry in the New World," Jim pondered.

"And it's only grown." Will collapsed into a nearby chair,

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exhausted merely from the mention of maintaining Caleb's spending urges. Sometimes he felt as though he were the adult in this guardian situation.

Their conversation was interrupted by the clapping of boots on the stairs and Violet nervously peeked her head around the corner of the room. They could partially see the full sleeve on her arm sticking out behind her. The bottom of her dress was also visible as it swept the floor.

"Let's see it," Jim coaxed her out.

Violet stepped into the room and the men marveled at the simple beauty. Her figure was well accentuated by the billowing lower part of the dress. Her waist was tightly wrapped by a simple white sash and the bodice and corset were uniquely formed to show off her breasts. She blushed at their admiring faces.

"Do you like it?" she asked while her eyes looked to the floor.

"I believe Mr. Tyler has really outdone himself this time," Jim complimented. He stepped up to the young woman and clasped her hands into his own. "You are a beauty to behold, my dear, and never believe otherwise." He glanced over his shoulder at his stupefied friend. "What say you, Will? Quite the fetching image, is it not?"

"Y-yes, quite well done," he stammered out. With all the dirt on her skin and her filthy clothing, he'd forgotten how close she was to his physical age.

"Well now, young children, I believe it's time for you to leave," Jim regretted to announce. He glanced outside at the clear sky. "And a better night could not have been asked for." There was a sly smile on his face as he leaned down to Violet's ear. "Be sure Will and yourself make me another visit soon." He gave her a wink and she emphatically nodded.

"I suppose it is time," Will agreed, though he looked at the two with suspicion. Their whispering would no doubt mean trouble for him. "I'll fetch the horses. Jim, if you could be kind

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enough to help Violet pack our luggage."

"Certainly, your royal highness," Jim agreed with a exaggerated bow. He held out his arm to the young lady. "May I escort you up the stairs, Miss Violet?" She giggled, and gladly took his arm.

Will quickly fetched the carriage and pulled it up to the kitchen door. There Jim and Violet had piled their few belongings, though Will noticed a basket hanging on his charge's arm.

"Food for the cat and for you two," Jim explained to his curious friend. "And a suitable bed for our feline friend." To emphasize his point, the old cat popped its head out from beneath the lid and mewed.

The other boxes were packed behind the carriage and the coffin was strapped to its usual spot on the top. Will helped Violet into the carriage and secured the door. He was about to jump into the box when Jim touched his arm.

"I must warn you about something, old friend," he warned as his happy demeanor slid off his face. "The boy who came from Tyler's with the clothes had a message from the old tailor. He's heard of some lawmen asking questions about a young man and a girl."

"Can we trust this information?" Will asked.

"I pay the man ample money each year. He means to keep me as a client for many more years," Jim assured him.

"Are they still in the area?" Will glanced around, as suddenly every shadow and tree was a danger.

"More than likely, they were asking about you two just this morning," Jim replied. "I'm sure they gleamed nothing from their questions, but they may be watching the roads at night for your carriage." He glanced at the fancy vehicle and frowned. "It certainly is difficult to mistake you for an ordinary traveler."

"I'll be on my guard," Will promised, and he swung himself up into the box.

"And don't be a stranger," Jim called out just as Will took

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the reins in hand. "I expect some more visits from the young lady."

"And you keep care of yourself, old man," Will returned. He snapped the reins and the horses took off on a fast trot.

Violet peeked out the window to wave goodbye to their friend as the carriage bounced away. Jim waved back until they had disappeared into the trees, and then he sighed.

"I'm trying..." Jim whispered. He grimaced when a spell of fatigue hit him and he closed his eyes to fight back the urge to return to his coffin. "Just don't stay away too long, Will. I'd like to have one more talk before I can't."

Chapter 9

The horses of the black carriage, well rested and fed on their stay at Jim's home, flew down the avenue and hit the main road in a few minutes. Will kept his eyes and ears alert for the lawmen as they skirted the nearby town and clattered along the path which led them north. The only distraction from his careful attentions was the sound of laughter coming from the carriage. Violet was amusing herself with the cat's antics, and Will cringed when he heard her scold the feline for clawing on the seats. That cat would be the death of all the upholstery.

Contrary to his concerns, their traveling that night was uninterrupted, and they made a good dozen miles before they were forced to pause. He could feel the annoying pains of hunger within himself, and that meant Violet was no doubt feeling the severe effects of her fledgling hunger. As a new vampire her hunger was more common than his own, so much like a newborn babe frequent feedings were necessary to satiate their hunger. Their path traveled by a rough, overgrown path, and he turned the carriage that way. After a hundred yards or so he stopped the vehicle and alighted just as Violet stuck her head out the window to see what was the matter.

"Just a short stop," Will reassured her as he opened the door. "For some nourishment, and to allow the cat some other place to stretch its claws." He didn't care too much about the cat's needs, but he thought he'd humor her.

"All right," Violet hesitantly agreed. The young woman was afraid the cat would still abandon her, but her worries were groundless. She stepped out and the feline eagerly followed her. He did not wander more than a few yards from the vehicle.

Will took the basket out and smiled when he opened the lid. Along with some jerky meat for the cat, there was a case of fine wine bottles filled with blood, along with two wine glasses. Each one was meticulously labeled with the month and year when

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the liquid had been bottled, and each had a pink ribbon wrapped around the labels. Jim had certainly outdone himself on his parting gift to them. Will pulled a random bottle, for they would all have the same cold, bitter flavor in them regardless of when they'd been filled, and he set the basket back into the carriage. He didn't want to leave anything behind when they resumed their journey in a few minutes.

Violet was seated on a patch of grass beside the road, being careful not to stain her new dress. She really did look lovely against the backdrop of the wild woods and clear night sky above them. Her pale cheeks accentuated her color dress and her movements were more graceful now that she had regular doses of blood. Will seated himself at her side and popped open the bottle after he'd set a pair of glasses on the ground.

"It appears Jim has outdone his hospitality," Will mused as he poured her a glass.

"He was nice, wasn't he?" Violet agreed. Her hungry eyes watched him, but she restrained herself from grabbing a glass and downing the contents. He was glad to see she had some control at such a short distance from the blood.

"A better friend would be hard to find," her guardian replied. He set aside the bottle and picked up both glasses. One he handed to Violet, and the other he kept for himself.

"Have you known him for a long time?"

"So long that I've forgotten how many years," Will revealed as he sipped on his drink. He noticed she was holding her own glass at a considerable length from herself. "You have to learn to control your hunger at some point," he scolded. "Avoiding blood altogether will only make the hunger worse."

"I know, but still..." she admitted with a heavy sigh. "It feels like I lose myself when I drink it."

"You'll lose yourself to the hunger if you don't," he pointed out. He nodded at her glass. "Now try only taking a small drink. You have time enough to practice."

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Violet dreaded this test of her will, but she nodded her head. She raised the vessel to her lips and took a quick sip before pulling it away from her eager lips. Her eyes were dilated and her hand trembled, but she overcame the urge. Will had a difficult time hiding his proud smile.

"I suppose I could get used to this," she gleefully informed him. She was proud of herself, and showed it with a beaming smile. Her cat came up at that point and mewed his own compliment at her small achievement. "I still haven't given you a name yet, have I, little kitty?" she reminded herself as she stroked his soft, long hair.

Suddenly their quiet solitude was broken by the soft sounds of the hooves of a horse wandering down the unused road toward them. Will downed his glass and Violet covered her own as he stood to his feet. His eyes searched through the darkness and he spotted a horseman leisurely approaching them. The man was tall and about middle age, and wore a wide brimmed hat. A handkerchief was wrapped around his neck and he wore dark clothes which allowed him to blend into the night. The light of the moon reflected off of a pair of pistols on the man's hips, and he held himself erect with a posture denoting confidence. Whoever he was, he knew where he was going and for what reason.

"Hello there," the stranger called out as he stopped a few dozen yards from the carriage. He evidently had a hard time seeing the two on the ground because his head turned this way and that looking for the occupants of the vehicle. "Is help needed here?"

"No help needed," Will called back. He knelt down for a moment and gave Violet his glass. "Stay still, and if there's trouble, get into the carriage," he whispered to her. She nodded and hugged the cat to herself in case she would need to run. Then Will returned his attention to their new companion. "We were only stopping for a short while to enjoy the night."

"Way out here?" the man asked. Will was not pleased to

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watch him alight from his horse. "Is there anyone else with you?"

"Only a young woman," Will hesitated to reply. He didn't like the thread of questions coming from the man, and he was reminded of Jim's warning about the lawmen. "My wife, you see." Violet stifled a cough of surprise which caught the stranger's ears.

"Is she well?" he wondered, and he led his horse on a few yards closer to them.

"Quite well, but perhaps we should take our leave," the young man assured their suspicious guest. He helped Violet up, but the stranger was interested in getting a good look at her since he hurried forward. Will blocked his way by pushing Violet behind him. "Stop there, sir, or you'll regret your actions." The man came to an immediate stop.

"I'm sorry, I merely thought I recognized the girl," the stranger answered. He continued to try to look around Will, though, and his eyes darted from the young man to the handsome coach. "Been traveling far?"

"Not far enough for the man you follow," Will commented, and the man laughed.

"I work for no one but the law, young man," the stranger corrected him. He opened his jacket and showed the five pointed star on his vest. "I don't want any trouble, I'm just here to take that young lady with you back home where she belongs. A Mr. Durn is very worried about her safety."

Everything the gentleman informed them confirmed Will's first suspicions, but he couldn't comprehend how the man had been able to find them. Perhaps the law had been ordered to watch all the main roads heading north, but that seemed unlikely they'd be willing to do that for a mere kidnapping. Murder and bank robbery likely, but not for the disappearance of a girl with no real connections to anyone, not even to a provincial tycoon.

"The law doesn't concern us." Will had a hard time disguising his disgust at the mention of Durn's name. "And that man has no claim over this girl."

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"I'm sorry to hear that, young man," the lawman regretfully answered. He placed a hand on the butt of one of his pistols. "I was gonna let you go, seeing as how the miss here was doing fine, but I've got orders to take you in for kidnapping."

"You don't want to do that, sir," the young man threatened. Violet felt Will's hand on her shoulder tighten its grip.

"You're not leaving me with much choice. I'm warning you again that I'm a good shot with this gun here, and I've never had a man get away from me," the man countered. He pulled the weapon from its holster and pointed it straight at Will. "Now if you don't want that young lady with you hurt in a pointless firefight, I reckon you should just unbuckle that belt and raise your hands into the air."

Violet yelped when she was suddenly shoved toward the carriage. She hit the side of the vehicle the same moment Will vanished from where he had been standing. The wine glasses toppled from her hands and fell unharmed to the soft ground. Her cat angrily yowled and she wrapped both arms tightly around him to stifle his furry fury. The lawman was glancing this way and that along the road trying to spot his adversary.

"What in the hell...?"

Before the man knew what had happened, Will appeared in front of his horse and grabbed the reins out of the man's hand. Then the lawman was knocked from his saddle and landed hard on the ground, but he kept a firm hold of his gun. He scrambled to his feet and shakily pointed the weapon at Will.

"How the hell did you do that?"

"It doesn't matter," Will replied as he turned the sheriff's horse around. Then Will whacked it hard on the rear, and the steed took off at a fast gallop. That still left the lawman with options, though, and his eyes darted over to the carriage. He could commandeer one of those fine horses for himself.

"I'm going to give you one last chance, boy, and then I'm going to have to shoot," the sheriff informed him as he cocked the

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gun. Will had to admire the lawman's ability to keep a cool head, even after seeing him use his vampiric speed.

Will didn't give him a chance to shoot the gun. In a blink of an eye he had grabbed the gun and thrown the sheriff to the ground face-first. The man hit the dirt hard enough to knock the wind out of him, and he could only roll over and stare in bewilderment at the young man standing above him. Will held the man's gun in one hand, and in one swift tensing of his fingers the weapon gave an audible crunching sound as the metal twisted beneath his strength. He tossed the useful gun at the feet of the lawman and his eyes blazed with an unnatural light in the darkness.

"Don't follow us any farther," Will coldly advised.

The man didn't agree but neither did he argue, but Will took that as an affirmative. He turned his back on the sheriff and walked over to the carriage. Violet still stood beside the door with the cat in her arms. She was no longer surprised by his abilities, but she still had trouble fathoming the sheer power he possessed, and what one day she, too, would have.

"Let's go," Will commanded as he opened the door.

"Wait a moment, boy."

The companions turned back to the lawman, who was now standing. He had pulled out his other pistol and the barrel was steadily aimed at Will. The sheriff was unnerved by what he had seen, but his curiosity proved to be greater than his fear.

"How did you do that trick?"

"We haven't time for your questions," Will argued. His eyes were on the weapon. Though the bullets were not silver, he had no intention of allowing Violet to be accidentally shot by a stray discharge. "If you wish for another beating I can gladly oblige, otherwise allow us to leave."

"I can't let you do either of those things. I aim to bring you in, and I won't stop until you're mine." To emphasize his point, the sheriff pulled back the hammer of his gun.

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Will merely narrowed his eyes, but that was enough movement to cause the lawman's finger to flinch. The pistol shot off, but the aim was as wild as Will had feared. He pushed Violet into the cab and felt the bullet enter his side and lodge itself into his ribcage close to his heart. The pain shot through his body, but he would not give their enemy the satisfaction of his cries. Instead Will turned his heated eyes on the lawman and dashed at him.

Will tore the weapon from his hand and grabbed the sheriff by his neck. He easily raised the man high off the ground, as high as his arm would allow, and relished when the man clawed at his arm for release. He would have gladly crushed the man's windpipe and saved them a follower on their heels, but Violet's sweet voice called from the carriage.

"Will!" He turned to find her seated on the floor and kneeling out the door. Her eyes filled with fear when she saw his own so enraged. "Please let him go." The flames in Will's eyes were extinguished by the pity in hers, and he turned back to his captive with merely disgust rather than fury.

"Never follow us again, or I promise worse will happen to you."

Then Will released the man, and he dropped to the ground in a cloud of dust. The vampire moved over to the coach and ordered Violet back before he shut the door. In a quick movement he was up on the box with the reins in his hand. He turned the vehicle about while the lawman stumbled to his feet.

"How did you do those things?" the lawman asked again. Will glanced down at him from high on the box, and there was a melancholy in his voice when he next spoke.

"Pray that you never find out."

Will snapped the reins and the horses quickly trotted passed the disheveled man. The sheriff's hands balled into fists as he watched his targets leave, unable to stop them nor follow. Soon the trees blocked his view and even the sound of the carriage disappeared.

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"I can tell you what happened," a voice suddenly interrupted the silence. The lawman quickly turned and his eyes fruitlessly scanned the darkness.

"Who's there?" he called out. Out of the shadows stepped two tall gentlemen dressed in long, dark coats. Their eyes held the same infernal look as the young man he'd just fought, but the lawman was unafraid of them after he was able to decipher their appearance. "Oh, it's you two again." He glanced between the two familiar gentlemen. "When you told me where to find this lawbreaker, you said nothing about this man being able to perform such devil's work."

"It must have slipped my mind," the slender one replied. He was not at all remorseful for the omission. "But surely you're not interested in those terrible gifts he has."

"He's got some trickery that makes him think he's above the law. I want to know what it is."

"You sound very sure of your wants. Didn't you hear that lawbreaker? He said to let it rest." The slim stranger's words only angered the lawman. His fists were clenched at his sides.

"Never mind that. What information can you give me this time about this man's abilities?" he asked as his eyes narrowed. One of the men stepped forward and grinned, showing a pair of long, pointed fangs.

"If that's what you want, then I suppose we must give you the information you seek," the tall one promised. There was something about the man's tone the lawman didn't like. The sheriff took a step back and wished his guns were still in their holsters.

"How much information?" the lawman asked.

"Centuries of information," the stranger replied. His gaze fell upon the lawman's neck and from his coat he pulled forth a vile filled with red liquid. "Allow me to show you."

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Violet buried herself in the corner of the carriage when they passed the lawman with his furious eyes. When they reached the main road, she had even more reason to scrunch against the side when Will cracked the reins. The horses took off at a fast gallop and the vehicle rocked from side to side. She clutched the cat to herself while the countless potholes in the road caused the wheels to jump from the ground. The view outside the window passed by in a flash of dark, muted colors.

Will occasionally glanced behind them to see if the lawman followed, but the road remained empty. However, he felt no comfort from that and so he raced the horses down the wheel-rutted path. That was another close call, and it showed them they were not far enough away from Violet's home town to warrant any more delays. They needed to reach the canal as soon as possible, and maybe there the lawmen and Durn would lose their scent.

With plans formulated they traveled the remainder of the night through the local small and large towns. The farther north they drove the more populated the country became. Only at the hint of the rising sun did Will stop the carriage in one of the larger hamlets, the county seat at Columbus. Maybe in the crowd of some three thousand residents and numerous visitors, they would not be found so easily.

When Will jumped down from the carriage, he winced at the pain of the bullet against his ribs. The wound had healed around the metal, but he would need to reopen the hole tomorrow and pull it out. It would be a process more painful than the initial shot, but he would be tortured by the agony if it was not removed. His only consolation was his dark outer clothes hid the blood from both the surrounding humans and Violet. She probably assumed the wild bullet had missed them both.

The horses were stabled and they hurriedly checked in at the hotel. Will had a short chat with the proprietor, a man of about fifty with sharp eyes.

"Have you seen many lawmen around here? Sheriffs, I

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mean."

"Not sure. My eyes aren't as good as they used to be." Will got the hint and pulled out several gold coins from his purse. They clanked when they hit the desk.

"What about your ears?"

"They're working just fine, and I think I heard say that they're looking south of here for some murderer."

"Murderer?" This was very unwelcome news to the companions. Violet was especially aghast at such a terrible act. "Who's been killed?"

"Some deputy that was after a pair, a man and a woman." The proprietor glanced between the two, and he pulled at his short whiskers. "They might be offering a reward for their capture."

"They might, but the government doesn't offer much these days for rewards." Will emphasized his point by dropping half a dozen more coins. The whole pile disappeared behind the desk.

"Yes, I suppose you're right. I wouldn't want to get involved, anyhow."

"And are pets allowed in your rooms?" Will asked in an offhand manner.

"Not at all. I don't tolerate them." The man leaned over his counter and squinted at the pair. "Why do you ask?"

"Merely curious, that's all." Will dropped another gold piece on the desk and the man quickly slid the money into his pocket.

Violet looked around the large town in amazement and curiosity. She would have wanted to explore the sights, but there wasn't time and she had something more important to attend to. They snuck the cat passed the lobby in the basket and took a first-floor room in the back so they could leave the window open. She had misgivings about allowing him around such a busy and unknown town, but they had little choice. The cat would not have been comfortable cooped up all day in their room. Still, she was smiling when she made the feline a bed inside the blankets of the

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basket, and her pet hopped in with a contented purr resounding through its body.

Will himself felt uneasy with the open window because of the risk, but there really was no getting around it. If they locked it inside the room, the cat would no doubt have made a racket and attracted attention. The coffin was settled in the center of the room and the curtains closed to at least keep prying eyes out of their space. He opened the lid and turned to Violet, who was still playing with her cat.

"Violet, we need to sleep," he insisted. He was most eager to rest his body against the feeling of that bullet inside him.

"Must we always sleep?" she asked him. She hardly felt tired, and she was very well aware of the closeness of his body to hers inside that small space. The thoughts made her blush.

"If we don't sleep then we must drink more blood," Will told her. This bit of news didn't sit well with her detestation for the blood aspect of their immortal life. "And the sun is our enemy until we've acquired an immunity to its effects."

"An immunity? So we can walk outside during the day?" Violet wondered, and her eyes widened in interest.

"After countless centuries, it is possible," Will reluctantly replied. He inwardly cursed himself for giving her such grand hopes. "But very few vampires ever acquire the ability before they're destroyed."

"Oh..." his charge shrunk back. Her hand went up to where he'd bitten her. "Does that happen so often? This destruction?"

"The lifespan of our kind varies with the abilities in the bloodline and the dangers we find ourselves confronted with," he carefully explained. She didn't appear to understand, so he closed the coffin and seated himself on the lid. "Have you still been able to gather much from my memories inside of yourself?"

"I feel something inside me," she admitted as she bit her lip. "But I'm...I'm scared of what's in there. It feels so dark and cold." Will raised a brow at the description of himself inside her,

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and she caught the meaning of his look. "I don't mean to insult you," she hurriedly apologized. Then she glanced away. "It's just...I just don't know what to do."

"You have to allow those memories."

"But seeing your memories, how will I know myself?" she asked. He cracked a smile at her concern. She misunderstood how those memories would affect her.

"Most of them should not overwhelm your own memories, but become an echo," Will struggled to explain. It had been so long since his own guardian had explained the mechanics that he could hardly recall the talk at all. This was also his first time inducting a complete novice into the vampiric world, since she was his first fledgling. He also hadn't been present for any other turning. They happened very rarely to control their hidden population. "The majority will become as ingrained as instinct, and intrude just as little upon your mind."

"So they will still be there, but I will only realize that when I need them?" Violet guessed, and Will nodded.

"Others, those that have information pertaining to our kind, are more like faint recollections," he continued. "Can you feel those soft memories?"

"A...a little," she replied as her face scrunched up in concentration. Will sighed and couldn't hide the smirk on his face at her cute expression.

"If the connection was working properly, you wouldn't need to concentrate," he pointed out.

"Well, how do I find my way to these memories?" she asked him as she crossed her arms over her chest. She felt so lost and frustrated. Will shook his head.

"Time must be what you need," he guessed. He just couldn't say for sure until he'd gotten a chance to speak with his guardian.

Violet frowned and her shoulders slumped. She idly played with the cat in the basket, but even the feline wanted to lay

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down for some rest. The night had been long for him, too.

"Will?" she suddenly asked.

"Yes?" he returned. He'd been lost in his own thoughts about how to solve Violet's connection problem to his memories.

"You said we were going to go east," she reminded him as she nodded her head in the direction where the road ran through town. "But we've been heading north all this time."

"We're going to be taking the Erie Canal to upstate New York, and from there to my guardian's home," he explained to her.

"Really?" she replied as she leaned in. Her eyes were bright and reflected her joy. "When will we get there?"

"Provided we have no more interruptions and have our meal without stopping, we should arrive at the village of Akron in a few days," he informed her. "From there we will hire a boat and farther north move to Cleveland. Our captain will ferry us and the carriage along the coast of Lake Erie to Buffalo, where the Erie canal begins."

"Cleveland? Akron?" Violet repeated. The names sounded so odd to her ears. He couldn't blame her.

"They are the starting points on the Ohio and Erie Canal system," Will explained as he stood to his feet. They'd talked long enough and the night had progressed into day. Even now he could feel the heat of the sun beginning to warm up the room. "But we had better get inside the coffin before the sun comes into the room."

Violet didn't want to argue as she glanced at the window. Outside along the alley she could see the rays of the sun were creeping toward them. There wouldn't be too much natural sunlight inside the room, but enough that sleeping outside the box would be impractical. Will opened the coffin and slid inside as Violet followed him in and positioned herself in her usual spot. The top was closed and they were encased in the comfortable, cool darkness.

"Are you comfortable?" Will asked as he tried to make as

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much room as he could for her.

"Perfectly," she mumbled as she closed her eyes. She was feeling drowsy from the feeling of the creeping sun. The young woman smiled as she smelled the familiar scent of her guardian. It made her feel safe knowing he was so close. "Good day, Will..." she muttered as she felt herself drifting off into the deep slumber.

"Good day, Violet," he whispered back.

Chapter 10

They slept well until about mid afternoon, when an incessant clawing sound caught Will's attention. He swiftly opened his eyes to find that Violet was still fast asleep, and the noise was growing louder. He listened to the sound for a long moment and realized it was coming from atop the coffin lid. The scratching was soon accompanied by a piteous mewling noise. Will had a hard time biting back his growl of frustration.

Violet's cat wanted inside the coffin.

"Go away," he hissed as quietly as he could manage.

The sound of his voice only made the fiendish feline more excited, and its meows grew louder. Grudgingly he placed his palm on the lid and tentatively raised it a few inches. The sunlight didn't shine directly into the coffin, but it lay just beyond them on the floor. He saw the cat hop off the lid and peek its pink nose into the narrow space between the lid and the side. Its blue eyes blinked at him and it mewed again.

Will sighed and opened enough of a gap to allow the feline to slink its way into the space. It was at least considerate enough to keep itself down at their feet, where it curled up in a fluffy ball and closed its eyes. The older vampire closed the lid and glared at the new occupant, but there really wasn't any other way to appease its persistent wants. Instead he lay his head down and tried to get back to sleep.

"Thank you," Violet whispered, and he was startled enough to jerk back. She giggled and opened her eyes. "For letting him in, that is."

"Yes, well, he was very persistent," Will replied. "But you should get back to sleep." She obeyed him, and somehow with such a crowd inside his coffin, Will quickly joined her.

The remainder of the day was uneventful and night fell

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upon the city. Rather than a hush when the light of the sun was extinguished, the city came alive with the night trade. Saloons lit their lamps and women stepped out of the houses of ill-repute to show off their wares. Inside the small room in the back of one of the hotels, a cat was softly meowing.

Will sighed and opened the lid even before he opened his eyes. The cat happily jumped out and watched the two vampires sit up in the coffin.

"He seems to have slept well with us," Violet laughed as the fiendish feline sat there swishing his fluffy tail.

"Indeed," Will replied. He had at best indifference to the pet, and at most scorn. The thing had no doubt been created to punish him for some transgression. The cat meowed again, and Violet clamored out of the coffin.

"He must be hungry," she guessed. She dug through their possessions and found some of the jerky Jim had given them. The cat eagerly ate the portion she gave it, and then scampered out into the alley. Violet was about to call him back when Will gently took hold of her arm.

"He'll be fine," he reassured her. "He no doubt wants some fresh air for a moment, and to relieve himself."

"Oh," Violet blushed, and she turned away from the window.

Will pulled out the grass-stained glasses and the opened bottle of blood. It was only fair they have their time for a drink. Violet scowled and took the cup when he offered it to her. She gazed down at the red, thick liquid.

"Someday I want to be rid of this need..." she murmured to herself.

"You would have better luck flying," Will gently scolded her. He downed his drink and put the cork back on the bottle. "For now drink, or you'll be hit with another attack."

Violet gave a sigh, this one resigned, and then she mimicked Will by drinking the entire contents in a few gulps. The

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trick caused her to choke on the blood, and her guardian smirked while he patted her on the back.

"Perhaps less haste next time," he advised, and she nodded through her coughing fit. He placed their supply of blood back in the basket and stood to his feet. Will winced when the bullet inside of himself stung him. "We will leave as soon as I've dealt with one final matter. We need as much night as we can gather for the journey." As though on cue the cat returned, refreshed and wanting attention from its mistress.

"A final matter?" his protege repeated.

"A matter of a bullet lodged in my ribs. I must remove it myself, or the pain will fester." Violet pulled back in horror, both at what he had told her and what he intended to do.

"A bullet? The one the man shot?" she guessed, and he nodded. "Is this not dangerous for even a vampire? Can you not have a doctor look at it?" Horrible images floated through her mind of her guardian dying in her arms, and she able to do nothing but comfort him. He shook his head.

"I know of none around here who I would trust with a body as unique as our own. This will not be the first time I have done this, and I have no intention of destroying myself with a small bit of surgery."

"Is there nothing I can do? No way I can help?" Violet saw his mind would not be changed, but perhaps she could do something for him. "Would drink help you through it?"

"Only blood. You might have a bottle at the ready for when I'm done." He gestured toward the basket and cork popper. "Disregard the glass. I will have too much thirst to feel obliged for niceties."

While Violet opened a new bottle of blood for her guardian, Will requested and was given a sharp blade from the proprietor. When Will noticed the man's concerned expression, he was in too much pain to bother with an excuse. Instead he returned to the room and found Violet impatiently waiting for him.

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"You may not want to watch while I do this. There will be a great amount of blood." Violet paled and took his advice by positioning one of the room's chairs away from him.

Will seated himself on the lid of the coffin and pulled over his upper clothing. The wound was gone but there was a slight bump on his side which showed where the bullet lay. He positioned the knife over where he thought the metal had entered his body and braced himself for the pain.

Then in one swift stroke he stabbed the blade into himself.

Will couldn't contain the cry of pain. It echoed around the room and Violet turned in her chair. When she glimpsed the knife in him and the blood which ran down his side, her face was a picture of horror and disbelief. She rushed over to him, but he let go of the knife and blocked her with his hand. His fingers were covered in his own blood, and the liquid dripped down the joints.

"One moment," he gasped out.

Will's aim had at least been true and the tip of the blade had struck the side of the bullet. That had forced the metal to scrape up against his ribs, but he would soon be rid of all the pain. He twisted the knife to dig into the far side of the bullet, and each minor movement was pure agony. His teeth were crushed together and his eyes slammed shut while he concentrated on pulling the bullet out with the tip of the knife. He found success when the point met the same on the bullet, and then he angled the knife to push the bullet back through the hole he had created. All of his twisting had widened the wound large enough for the bullet to burrow its way along his side and to his waiting hand.

The bullet poked out of the edges of his torn skin, and with deft fingers he pulled it forth from its fleshy prison. Then the knife followed and he lost his grip on the handle. It clattered to the floor while Will sat still for a moment to compose himself against the pain. His side was bleeding profusely and Violet was standing over him with the bottle of blood in hand. Will held out one of his bloodied hands, and she hesitantly handed him the

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container.

Much to Violet's horror, Will ripped off the cork and tipped the neck of the bottle back into his mouth. The blood poured down his throat like a life-giving waterfall, and yet not a drop was wasted. None of it so much as slid down his lips, and in a few moments the entire container was emptied. Then he dropped his hand and the bottle with it, and he lowered his head to his chest. The movement had been so sudden that Violet worried he might have gone unconscious. Without needing to breathe, Will was eerily still. Violet stepped toward him and reached out to poke him on the shoulder.

"I am fine." She was so startled that she jumped back with a small yelp. Will raised his eyes, and she saw how tired and wracked with pain he was. "The pain will pass after a day, so long as no other complications occur."

"Are you sure you don't need to lay down, or perhaps you need another bottle?" she asked him, but he shook his head.

"Tell the stable master to hitch the horses. We will leave this place in a few moments." Violet was shocked by his order. He was in no condition to be moved, much less bounced around on these awful roads. Instead of obeying his order, and she crossed her arms over her chest.

"I will do no such thing. I insist we stay here, at least for the night," Violet replied. Her voice was more firm than he had ever heard it. Will intended to argue the point, but another stab of pain hit him in the side. The agony was not as great as before, but he admitted to himself that he dreaded the harsh ride atop the carriage box.

"Perhaps for a few hours, if only to give the horses a longer rest," he agreed. Violet didn't believe such an excuse, not when she could see the muscles on his face twitch with every bit of pain. "But then we must be off." His charge wasn't pleased with leaving that night, but she had won a partial victory and reveled in it. She decided a celebration was in order, and the sounds of the night

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tempted her curiosity.

"Then you stay here and rest, and I shall take a short walk around this city of Columbus."

Will was quite alarmed with this separation. He was well aware of the rough men, vampire and human alike, who haunted the night. Without her vampiric strength she would be as defenseless as any human woman. He stood up, and now it was Violet's turn to be deeply worried. She rushed over to his side and put her arms on his shoulders.

"What do you think you're doing?" she scolded her companion.

"I would be a poor guardian if I were to allow you out there alone," Will pointed out. He straightened himself and pushed the pain down. "I intend to go with you."

"Then I would rather we stay here. The better for you to rest." Violet had no intention of causing harm to Will for just an excursion outdoors. However, he shook his head and smiled at her.

"There isn't much to see but a few of the houses and the taverns. The tour will be over quite quickly."

"Then we'd best get it done with and have you back here." The young woman escorted him toward the door and they were soon outside on the boardwalk. Will turned his head both ways, pondering where to go.

"Where would you begin?" he asked after he had managed to free himself from her grip. Her strength after the blood was certainly impressive, but not near as much as she should have at this point in her development. Those locked memories and instincts were holding her back.

"What about the houses?" she suggested. The ruckus around the business district was very loud indeed, and Violet sought repast in the soothing pictures of domesticity. "I saw so many beautiful ones last night."

"Why those?" he wondered as they stepped out into the

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noisy night air. Guests were coming and going into the lobby of the hotel and outside the roads were filled with merry-makers on their way to have some fun.

"J-just a fancy of mine," she admitted, but he noticed she hesitated. There was more than a fancy behind her reason. She had dreamed of leading a life of blissful marriage with a loving husband, but not she supposed that would never happen unless the man was a vampire and they had several homes around the country to hide in. Children, too, were an impossibility.

However, before they could step any direction Will was distracted by the arrival of a carriage along the main road. The vehicle distinctly rivaled his own in style and elegance and was pulled by a fine pair of chestnut horses who held their heads high and trotted at a good pace. The beasts suddenly halted, however, only a few yards from the entrance to the hotel and whinnied at the sight of the vampires. The driver let the steeds trot over to the hotel and stop in front of the companions, and Violet was surprised to find the horses had ruby-red eyes. Will, however, didn't like this new situation at all and he pulled Violet behind him. The door to the carriage opened and two gentlemen alighted from the vehicle.

They were pale and could almost have passed as brothers with their long hair pulled back in identical pony tails, and both their noses finishing at points. However, one had a round face and the other was distinctly sharper. Their complexions slightly differed, with one showing an origin from the dreary island nation of Britain and the other the more weighty muscle of the Germanic peoples. There was only one aspect of the strangers which mattered to Will, and that was the unnatural aura around them. They were as undead as Violet and he. Their horses, too, appeared to have been changed. It was uncommon but not unheard of for pets to be turned into vampires.

"Greetings, fellow travelers," the thinner one began the conversation, and his tone was reminiscent of Jim's own English

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accent. Will politely inclined his head, but didn't speak. The stranger ignored the lack of reply, and instead turned to Violet. "And who have we here? A new fledgling into our midst?"

"That's hardly a discussion to be started in such an open area," Will commented.

"Then care to join us for a drink? We could speak privately in one of these busy taverns."

"My apologies, but we've already had our meal," Will replied. He didn't trust the arrival of these two vampires. There was something not quite right about it, but he couldn't put his finger on the idea. Perhaps it was the figure who still sat in the carriage which caught his suspicion. The person was seated mostly out of sight and was careful not to move. "If you'll excuse us, we were about to see the sights of the city." The lean one stepped in front of them and effectively blocked their path.

"We must insist," the tall one answered for them both. "The name's Mark Hanson, and my friend over here is Gregory Steiner."

"A pleasure," Steiner greeted in a thick German accent, and with a slight bow of his head.

"And we really would like to speak with others who know us," Hanson continued. "You know how rare it is for our kind to speak to one another, and we cannot pass up getting to know such a beautiful newcomer to our illustrious group." He smiled and bowed his head to Violet, who returned the gesture but without a smile. There was something about these vampires that did not earn her trust.

"Ve would be glad to provide ze drink," Steiner offered. He snapped his fingers and the coachman dropped down off the box. The man, for he was human, quickly went to the rear and produced from the luggage a bottle of what appeared to be fine wine. Everyone in the group, however, knew better. "A very good vintage," the German tempted them as he took the bottle from their servant. "It would give new life to you," he added with a chuckle.

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"Come, come, what's the harm in a little chat among new friends?" Hanson asked. Will glanced between the two gentleman and finally nodded.

"Very well," Will agreed. He looked down the street at the various establishments. "The small tavern at the end of the block. Would that be suitable for you gentlemen?"

"Very suitable," Hanson replied. He turned to Violet and she could see he was about to offer his arm to her, but Will intruded by offering his own.

The young woman couldn't understand why there was a fuss over her arm, but she gladly took Will's offer. They went on their way to the tavern with the two men behind. Violet noticed Will was stiff, and when they found a table in the back he seated her closest to the door.

"You know, sir, you haven't introduced us to yourself or your young companion," Hanson commented after they'd all taken their seats. "From your clothes, I gather you're from the upper crust of society and of a long lineage."

"My name is William Holbrook, and this is Violet Meadow," Will introduced them. Violet caught the fact that he used his alias name, and her own had changed. "We're just on our way to the east to tour some of the older towns of my acquaintance."

"Always nice to come back to long-forgotten homes, isn't it?" Hanson replied with a wide grin. He prodded his companion as he pulled the cork from the bottle. A waitress had been kind enough to bring them four relatively clean glasses. "What say you, Steiner?"

"Mein Gott, no," Steiner answered with a firm shake of his head. "Those drafty castles were nearly the death of me as a mortal."

"And where are you two gentlemen heading?" Will asked them. "To Canada?"

"We were going to stay on this side of the border and view

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the Great Lakes," Hanson explained. He carefully poured out drink to all of them. Will took two glasses and handed one to Violet, but a look in his eye caught her attention. Given the obvious tense circumstances, she guessed he didn't want her to drink any of it. "They have some wonderful packer ships along those waters now. Do you happen to recommend any for us to travel on?"

"I haven't been there for so long I doubt my memory would be of much use to you," Will admitted with a shrug. He tipped back the glass to drink, but Violet, attentive as she was, noticed his lips were pursed together. She doubted he imbibed any of the liquid. "You gentleman care to recommend a good path for us up to the lakes? We were thinking of viewing them for some days."

That outright lie revealed the entire picture to Violet. She knew they had no intention of stopping off anywhere except for their day rests. Will was lying to these gentlemen to gain information about where they were going and why. The problem she saw, however, was that the men, especially Hanson, were playing the same game.

"It seems that we're both lost around this area," Hanson laughed. He tipped back his glass and drank the contents in one gulp. Steiner followed suit, and they both noticed the hesitation on the part of their companions. "Drink up, friends. It's not as nourishing as anything fresh, but it certainly agrees with the body better than hunger."

"I'm afraid we must be going," Will announced as he stood from his chair. He offered Violet his arm, but Hanson protested.

"Come, come, so soon? The night's hardly begun. Surely we can speak for a while yet."

"I'm afraid we're on a tight schedule that won't allow any more time," Will replied with a shake of his head. He practically lifted Violet from her chair and tried not to wince when his chest protested the weight. "Perhaps another time."

"Now hold on there, young fellow," their slim acquaintance

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argued. He, too, stood to his feet and firmly grabbed Violet by her elbow. "There's no need to be so in a hurry. We're all friends here."

"Let go of her," Will growled, and Violet found herself broken free of Hanson's grip and pulled against Will's chest.

"I wasn't going to harm her," Hanson defended himself, and he held up his hands. Their voices were still low enough the rest of the room hadn't noticed their ruckus, but any more and they'd start catching someone's attention. "You and I both know the rules regarding not harming another of our kind except in self defense."

"Then you had better keep your distance from us," Will warned, and he turned toward the doors.

"You'd better watch your step, also, Stewart," Hanson answered, and Will froze. He swiveled back to the tall gentleman, who now had a wide grin on his face. "We wouldn't want anything bad to happen to such an important person. It's a dangerous country out here, especially when lawmen are tracking you." Will scowled at the men, but they were unafraid of his furious and surprised glance.

"You mean to threaten us?" Will challenged the pair.

"Only giving a friendly warning," Hanson countered. "You surely know how troublesome the law can be once they've found your trail."

"Especially when they have assistance from others," Will accused them, and now Violet had her chance to start in surprise. Her companion was essentially accusing the two gentlemen of conspiring with the law, and against them.

"Well, we wouldn't know anything about that, would we, Steiner?" Hanson asked his partner as he turned to the seated gentleman.

"Nein, nein," he answered, but there was a dark mirth in his tone that sent a chill down Violet's back.

"See, my young friend?" Hanson turned back to Will and

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his fledgling. "There is no need to be so accusing in your tone. We are all friends here."

"If we're friends, surely you can tell me if you've heard about a deputy being murdered. You came the same way we have, haven't you? Perhaps you saw something we missed." Will glanced between their faces and noticed their eyes held a tinge of mischief.

"I'm sorry to say we haven't heard anything about a man's murder, Mr. Holbrook," Hanson replied. He leaned over and gave the pair a toothy grin. "I'm sure you don't have anything to worry about with the law. Now wouldn't you rather have some more wine? It looks like you've hardly touched yours."

"I would rather tear your throats out merely to listen to you scream," Will quietly promised as he glanced between the two. He saw through their poor trickery and realized this pair had caused them the confrontation with the sheriff, and any future complications with the law. They had put his fledgling in unnecessary danger. "But you would be spared such pain if you tell us what you know and why you follow us."

"Oh?" Hanson wondered as he raised a brow. "And how would you accomplish such a terrible fate for us?"

Will was sorely tempted to interrogate the men right then, but he had several problems. One of them was Violet, who stood between the two men in confusion and fear. He needed to get her out of here and someplace safe. Another was the crowd around them. Their argument had finally caught the notice of most of the room, and Will had enough problems with the law right now to start a fight with Hanson in such a public place. The final problem was his current health issues which kept him from using his full strength. Instead he opted for a quick escape, and without another word Will dragged Violet out of the tavern and onto the street.

"What does this all mean?" Violet asked him.

"It means there's something very wrong here," he whispered, and his tone scared her. It was dark and worried, as

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though he was trying to hold back both anger and fear.

"What's wrong? What are you talking about?" He didn't respond, and it was her turn to become angry. She pulled back on her hand when they were halfway along the next street, and he turned back at her signal. "What does this all mean?" She wanted to know the truth, not what she could try to discern from the talk with the men. There had been two conversations going on, and she could hardly catch the true, underpinning one beneath.

Will frowned and glanced around them. The area was crowded, but there was an alley not far off. Into this he led her, and after making a careful inspection of the space he felt it safe to speak.

"Our kind are very rare," he explained. He looked directly into her eyes to emphasize his message. "The chances of meeting the man near Jim's home and this pair so close together is not a coincidence."

"Maybe they're merely traveling like we are?" she weakly suggested, but he shook his head.

"No, these gentleman are connected, and what's worse, I believe they have following us for quite some time," he replied as he looked down the alley to the main thoroughfare. "They came upon the same road as we traveled, and did you notice there was a third passenger inside the carriage?" She shook her head. "There was some reason that person did not want to be introduced to us."

"So what do we do?" she whispered. Everything he'd just told her was no doubt true, and she was starting to get scared.

"We can only flee," Will told her. He closed his eyes and focused his ears on the area around them. Violet was confused by his stiff stance and the way he tilted his head slightly this way and that.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Shh," he commanded, and she frowned. After a few more moments he opened his eyes and found his fledgling was not amused. At this moment, however, that wasn't the highest

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concern. "They've moved on to one of the saloons on a block off the main road. This is our chance to leave."

"You heard that all the way from here?" she asked.

"One of those gifts that is still trapped inside you," Will informed her, and he took her hand in his own.

He quickly led her to the opposite end of the alley to which they'd entered. This entrance opened to a less busy side-street and he turned left toward the hotel. The companions flitted through the shadows as fast as Violet was able to keep up. They soon arrived at the window to their room and entered through the opening. Their furry companion was patiently waiting for them inside the room, and Will had to admit to himself that the creature was smarter than the average cat.

"We must leave right now, so grab the basket and go back out the window," he instructed.

Violet did as she was told, along with letting the cat into the basket, and she stepped back out through the alternate exit. Will followed her with the large coffin which he pushed through the window. Once outside he easily hefted the box onto his shoulders and turned to the left where he strode down the alley. Violet glanced back at the window one last time before they rounded the corner of the building and nearly ran into Will, who had stopped just at the entrance to the street.

"Keep your eyes out for that carriage. Even the horses cannot be trusted."

"The horses?" she repeated. Then she recalled how they'd turned so quickly toward them upon entering the town. "Did their horses know we were like them?" she asked, and Will grimly nodded.

"Even different species, if they have been turned, can recognize others of the vampiric kind and are attracted to them," Will explained. In the streets he saw nothing to arouse his suspicions, and he led her toward the hotel stables.

They safely made it inside and found their horses well

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rested and the carriage ready to be hitched. After paying the stable master and hurrying him along on his task, they were ready to travel in a few minutes. Violet and her pet sat inside the carriage and Will took his place atop the box when he sensed something amiss.

The doors to the stable were open to invite customers inside, so on his perch he had a commanding view of the street. At the far end of the first block a vehicle emerged from the block off the main road. Their enemies' carriage was on the move, and turned toward them.

"Damn it," he muttered, and he whipped the reins.

His horses heard his tone and felt the urgent clack of the bits in their mouths, and they knew something was amiss. They shot out of the stable and turned onto the main road toward the opposing demon horses. Will's carriage flew down the main road as people and horses alike parted from the hurried vehicle, but still the opposing carriage leisurely trotted in their direction. Within a few moments they were side by side, and Will caught a glimpse of the two occupants they had met. The thin, tall gentleman tipped his hat as they hurried passed, and Will caught a better glance of their mysterious companion.

It was the same ragged vampire Jim had fought.

Now Will knew something was wrong, and was glad when he looked behind them and found the carriage had not turned to follow. Rather, it was slowing to a halt just in front of the hotel as though they meant to stay the night. He had no doubt the time would come when those vampires would cause them a great deal more trouble, but right now they were playing a game of cat-and-mouse with his fledgling and himself. However, two could play such a game and he intended to give them a chase until they were safely traveling along the canal.

Chapter 11

Will thought over their itinerary while the carriage sped down the road. Columbus was now well behind them and they had roughly one hundred miles left to Akron. From there they would travel along the canal line to Lake Erie, and then follow the shore to the canal with the same name. The entire time they would be open to attack from others on the water. It was an attack he much expected if those three vampires were following. He couldn't fathom what reasoning led those other undead to follow, but he could imagine the end meant mortal danger to both Violet and himself.

With those thoughts swirling in his mind he cracked the reins and sped the horses on faster. If they allowed the horses only an hour's worth of rest each night and hid during the day, they could make that distance in two nights. The village of Akron offered sanctuary in the form of a well-known acquaintance, one he could be sure would lead them as safely as possible along the Great Lakes. They need now only to speed along the rough roads.

Regardless of the delayed start Lady Fortune smiled upon them the roads were superior and they made fifty miles that night. Will no longer trusted any populated area, particularly since the carriage driver for the other vampires was human, and so he led the horses far off the beaten path along a lane that could hardly be called a road. Weeds grew high in ruts barely visible, and even the most trusted eye with the aid of day would have a hard time finding the way. Will stopped the carriage in a wide spot and carefully stepped down off the box while Violet peeked her head out of the door. Her face was pale and she clung to her precious feline as though it was her only line to sanity. She had evidently been worrying herself to the point of distraction with terrible thoughts of those other vampires.

"There's no sense to allowing your fear to best you in a match," he scolded her as he opened the door. "We will arrive at

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Akron tomorrow and then be off into the Lakes in two days time."

"But how are we to hide ourselves on a boat?" she asked while he hopped up onto the roof of the carriage. There was no cover thick enough to hide them from the sun, so they could need to sleep with the coffin on the ground

"There is an old friend of mine, a captain who navigates those waters," Will answered. He jumped down with the coffin carefully in hand and set their bed upon a soft area of wild grass. Violet noticed how he winced on the landing. His side was still bothering him. "He will give us passage along the Lakes all the way to Albany, or at least as far as his boat can clear the locks."

"Are there a great many of the locks?" Violet wondered. "And is it a great distance?"

"Much greater than the distance we have traveled from your home to here," he explained. The lid of the coffin was opened even as he felt the air heat up with the rising sun. Quickly he unhitched the horses and stakes their reins to the grass. There they could feed all day to their hearts content and rest for the next night journey. "Now we must rest before the sun burns us," he insisted as he climbed into the sturdy box.

Violet had not been idle while he put the horses to pasture. She had prepared her pet for the day by providing the feline with food on the ground beneath the carriage. The cat would have to work out water on its own by catching a bird or mouse. Then she quickly clamored into the casket with Will, and the lid was closed in time to keep the sun from slipping inside.

Without the sturdy walls and safety of a room, Violet felt more uncomfortable than she had before. To be laying outside beneath the full rays of the sun was disconcerting, particularly when she recalled how Will's burned hand had appeared merely at the touch of the day star. She shuddered to think what a full, unprotected exposure would do to their bodies.

"The coffin is sturdier than it looks," Will tried to sooth her fears when he felt her tremble. "The light won't penetrate the

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walls, and we are on firm ground, so there is no chance of tipping over. Do not worry over it." Violet nodded and tried to get comfortable, but Will could tell there was at least one other question still bothering her. He sighed. "What is it now?"

"That obvious?" she returned. If he'd had the energy to look, he no doubt would have seen her face aglow with her pale blush.

"Quite, and neither of us will get rest until your question is settled."

"I just...I was just wondering about the stranger vampires we have met. The two men and the one around Jim's home. I could feel there was something about them that was wrong."

"They were hardly prepossessing in kindness." Will was hardly surprised by her sense of disgust around those three vampires. The first vampire had been physically repulsive, and that had excited his suspicion at once. Meeting the other two could not have been a coincidence.

"I don't mean the way they looked, except in their eyes. They had dark eyes. They...they scared me."

"Perhaps because you're unaccustomed to viewing vampire eyes. There are many shades of color, more than even humans, and some of them can be very startling the first time you look at them."

"Maybe that's it" Violet didn't sound convinced by his words, but he had nothing else to say.

After that there was no more discussion, only sleep, and the day passed without interruption. Even the feline had enough decency to let the dead alone, and night came on peaceful and quiet. However, the new night did not reflect the feelings of the two vampires as they awakened. They had another long journey ahead of them, and both suspected danger was ever at their heels. The moment the lid was opened neither of them thought of anything else save for returning to the road and continuing on to Akron.

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Violet was pleased to find the cat curled up inside the carriage and very well prepared to leave. The horses, too, had rested themselves and were eager to stretch their legs along the roads. Within a few minutes the carriage was hitched and, with only a minor delay for a drink of blood, they were off again. Since Jim had given them ample containers the supply was not dwindling very quickly, but Will knew once the bottles emptied there would be only one way for him to acquire sustenance. Violet would be able to survive on his blood alone until their connection was broken, but that would weaken him and leave them open for attack.

These thoughts and more lay scattered in his mind while they traveled along the roads. Will also expected to find themselves followed by Hanson and his companions, but there was no sign of any other souls along the lonely road. The sky above was dark and overcast, which aided their escape to the port village. Akron was a relatively new incorporated village since the merger of the north and south sections, and it was the first leg on the canal system which stretched over three hundred miles to New York state. All of that distance would be traveled by water, which was a more direct and reliable route than the rough and muddy roads. They had been fortunate in traveling such a great distance these last few nights, but luck wouldn't favor them forever. If they didn't take the canals, sooner or later rain would come and mire the carriage down in mud. All their progress would wash away with the roads.

They rode on as the night around them waxed high. The white pines and hemlocks along the road encased the carriage and its passengers beneath a thick canopy of leaves and needles. The brush in the north was more dense than around Violet's hometown because of the numerous kettle ponds which dotted the region. Thus there were some areas of boggy, lush patches of bushes and water trees. Flowers with closed petals dotted the ground, and here and there they glimpsed the nocturnal prowling of the

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raccoon and fox. At the top of the night Will stopped the horses for an hour of rest in a far offshoot of the road. That allowed the other three, the two vampires and the cat, to stretch their legs and enjoy the scenery for a time.

Violet seated herself upon a stone while her cat crept away to hunt some poor, doomed rodent. Will came to stand quietly at her side, but most of his attention was to the sounds on the road. They were too quiet for his tastes. He almost preferred there be traffic in which they could meld, but apparently night travel was not encouraged because of the wet patches of earth. No doubt the hauling companies had lost more than one wagon to teach them the hard lesson that traversing these roads at night with freight was not advisable.

"Will?" Violet asked, and he glanced down at her. "Could you...could you tell me more about yourself?" She took the surprised expression on his face as a negative, and quickly sought to apologize for her curiosity. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

"No need for an apology." He was so little accustomed to speaking about himself except through lies that he found it hard to separate the fantasy from the reality. "I was born in England. Probably Liverpool, since that was where I always resided for as long as I could recall."

"But you don't have an accent like Jim," she interrupted.

"No, I dropped the accent soon after I arrived in the colonies." His mind went back to those days before a country had existed. "It caught too much attention, and since my guardian had decided on an estate in the north, I adopted an accent from that locale."

"Did you know your parents, or did you have any siblings?" Violet asked him

"At a very early age I was abandoned to a couple unrelated to me, so I remember nothing of my family," Will answered, and Violet turned her eyes toward the ground. She could not imagine how lonely such an existence must have been for a young boy. "I

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managed to survive by picking pockets and fooling the country boys and men out of their travel money." A wicked grin slid onto his face. "The poor lads hardly expected such a young man to fool them so well."

"How wicked of you to say that," Violet scolded. She had a frown on her face and all pity had vanished, but he was unaffected by her ill temper.

"Yes, well, the truth generally doesn't shine well on those who are involved," he philosophically replied. "I was still in that profession when I happened to attempt to pickpocket Caleb's purse. My efforts proved not up to the challenge, and he caught me. Rather than handing me over to the authorities, however, he expressed an interest in my personal affairs. I still cannot fathom what he saw in my dirty face and ragged appearance, but it impressed him enough to take me with him."

"And you went willingly?" It was now his turn to glance away, though in some embarrassment.

"Yes, well, Caleb is hardly a man who takes no as an answer to a question in which yes is the preferable response," he diplomatically explained. "We were companions for a few months, and I was attended to by one of his servants while he slept. At night he entertained me by showing me the sights of the larger European cities. I did not discover his secret until I managed to escape from a second story balcony in Vienna." Violet tried to hide her mirth at such an escapade by her stoic guardian, and he graciously ignored her twittering. "I invariably found myself in his apartment and discovered him asleep in his coffin. The servant was much incensed upon finding me there, and locked me in a closet close at hand. There I remained until Caleb awoke and was told of the situation."

"And he punished you?" Violet asked him.

"Strangely, or more appropriately for him, he found the entire adventure most amusing," Will dryly commented. "The man is easily amused, and offered to turn me into a vampire that

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very night."

"And you became this...you came into this life that way?" his young charged wondered.

"I couldn't accept that without knowing all the details," he admitted with a shake of his head. He was now pacing in front of Violet as he recalled the events those many years past. "And thus he offered to show me this strange world in which he existed. Night after night I followed him, and observed the benefits and drawbacks to such a life. Finally I made a choice."

"To join him then?" He paused so abruptly she shrank back when his eyes turned to glance into her own. The depths showed such a mixture of anger, regret and sadness that she was nearly overwhelmed. Through their connection she could even feel those strong emotions swirling through his person. In answer to her question, he slowly shook his head. He had not chosen the dark path.

"No, I decided to forsake his offer and return to my previous occupation," he admitted.

"But...but I don't understand," Violet whispered. She feared he would be angry at her continuing questions, but he merely sighed and ran a hand through his thick black hair.

"Misfortune fell on us before we could reach the Channel," he answered her. He had not thought over this memory in some time, no doubt because of the horrible reverberations it caused for the entirety of his life. "Caleb was badly injured in a fight with a group Hunters, and his wounds would have been fatal without a large quantity of blood."

"And you offered your own for him?" Violet asked after a long pause. He nodded.

"I had seen enough to know he was a good man, regardless of his existence as a vampire," Will recalled. He started to pace the ground again. The memories must have been filled with the frantic efforts for him to save his cursed companion, and his revival as one of the undead. "I offered my life to him, and he

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returned it with the gift of immortality."

"So in a way you didn't have a choice, either," his companion softly mused. Will paused and cast a side glance at her.

"In a way, no, but I didn't long blame him for his kindness," Will replied. He wished that perhaps she could forgive him someday. "He took me and showed me the world, and all the wonders it held."

Violet was quiet for a long moment while she thought over his story. Destiny was cruel to those most unaware of her intentions, and certainly neither of them could have foreseen such an end for themselves. An eternity as a creature which stalked the nights. She wrapped her arms around herself and sighed. Forever was such a long time. Even knowing that Will had lived so long, she could not imagine doing so herself.

"We had better be off," Will softly reminded her as he set a hand on her shoulder. "We can make Akron tonight if the horses hold out." By this time her furry companion had returned, and in a few minutes they were returned to the road.

Both of them pondered over their recent conversation, and Violet especially wondered at her companion's beginnings. He had no doubt lessened his trials and deprivations for the sake of narrative, and she could only imagine what horrors and temptations he had gone through on the streets of the large English metropolis. Caleb had no doubt seen something of a survivalist in the tough young man, and sought to save him from the worst of the paths he could have taken in so desperate a circumstance. Her thoughts only went in circles, however, and nothing productive came about them but more questions about her enigmatic creator.

While Violet pondered they rode on through the thick trees and wet lowlands. The closer they became to the port the more numerous the farms and small clusters of houses. Soon even those had given way to the well-trod streets of Akron, and they entered that village of a few thousand souls in as quiet and unassuming a

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manner as possible. Will was familiar with the area and drove through the many streets with but one focus, and that was to arrive at the port as quickly as possible. The sun hinted at rising when they found themselves along a backstreet which, by the apparent number of burly, well-tanned men, was frequented by those in the shipping business.

Will stopped the carriage at a busy, two-story clapboard lodging place, and hopped down off the box. The horses were panting hard and covered in sweat, but when their master came up to them they whinnied at his soft praises. They had done a fair distance these last two nights, and he promised them rest when they reached Lake Erie. Then he came up to the carriage window even as Violet peeked her head out.

"I want you to stay here," he commanded. His voice was so low she could hardly hear him over the boisterous noise all around them. "We may not find the captain tonight, and if that happens we will need to conceal ourselves outside the town for a night or two. Keep yourself out of sight and don't make a noise unless you need me. Do you understand?"

"Please let me go with you," she pleaded. Her eyes wandered around the rough, unshaven faces all around them. She trembled at the thought of being left alone with only her feline friend to protect her. Will frowned, but he couldn't deny how terrified she looked at their surroundings.

"If you truly want, but this house caters to every clientele regardless of needs," he warned. She vigorously nodded her head, though she had only an inkling of what he was trying to tell her.

The door was opened and Violet stepped out onto a board for keeping clients out of the ankle deep mud which filled the streets. Before she could close the door her feline companion had shot out and in a few agile steps was standing on the boardwalk in front of the tall building. A porch wrapped around the second floor directly above the first, and women flaunted their assets to the men who passed by. Some of the workmen heeded the calls of

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the sirens while others passed on for other diversions. On the porch lay a few men, and as they walked by Violet wasn't sure if any of them were breathing.

"What about the horses?" she asked as she happened to look back. The carriage and their steeds stood just to the side of the railing in front of the building. They would be at the mercy of the passerby, any of whom would lead them off.

"They won't leave without me," Will reassured her.

Chapter 12

Violet clung harder to Will when they entered the dull, smoke-filled saloon on the ground floor of the building. Spittoons were scattered about the wooden boards at their feet and a horrible stench rose up from the corners. There were dozens of tables with men gambling, drinking and generally carousing with the waitresses and ladies from the balcony. Above them the open rafters were interrupted in the back of the room by the second floor hall and apartments which led to the rear of the structure.

Will quickly strode through the crowd toward the stairs in the back which led to the second floor. Violet tried her best to avoid the tables and a few loose, drunken grasps by some of the customers. Her feline friend followed them through the mess of furniture and cast off wretches of humanity. They reached the stairs without incident, but at the top of the balcony there directly in their path stood a formidable woman. Her wide hoop skirts wouldn't allow them to pass without pushing her to the side, and that was apparently her objective.

"What's your hurry?" she asked as she nodded toward the floor below. "You went through there like you were looking for someone."

"Yes, Captain Johnson," Will politely informed her. She noticed his voice was full of urgent need. "Is he here?"

"What do you want with him?" she questioned. Her eyes narrowed and she looked at the two newcomers with more suspicion than before.

"We're on urgent business," the young man explained, but all the time his eyes were glancing around the balcony and area below them. "If you know where he is, please lead us to him. Otherwise we have nothing more to say to you."

The heavy-set woman stood there for a moment and Violet tensed when she sensed a fight might break out. Then, to the companions' utter surprise, the woman smiled and let out a great

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guffaw.

"Well, don't look so serious about it, hun," she scolded Will. The young man was a little taken aback by her open manner. "If you're wanting to see Captain Johnny, you'd best wipe that frown off your face. He doesn't like any of his friends looking so mean."

"Pardon my choice of words, we've been traveling too far tonight." His voice was more good-natured in tone. "But do you know where the captain is?"

"Of course, lemme tell him you're here, Mr...?" The large woman hadn't caught either of their names.

"Will Stewart, with a friend."

"Well, glad to meet you Will and friend," she greeted with another jolly laugh. "The name's Louisa." She stepped forward and gave them each a hearty, double-handed handshake. "Now I'll be back in a moment, don't you go nowheres."

The two companions were apprehensive when she turned around and went down to the end of the balcony. Once there she turned a left into the labyrinth of rooms, and out of their sight. Violet looked around in unease at the boisterous crowd below and the few women who stood in front of them along the railing. She didn't regret coming with Will, but she did regret fate having brought them here in the first place. Fortunately their new acquaintance was back in short order as she peeked around the corner to which she'd disappeared only a few moments before.

"All right, I've got him decent for your lady friend here so you may as well come see him," Louisa called to them. She noticed the few ladies on the railing who were chatting. "Get back to work, girls. The men won't entertain themselves, and if they do that means money not in our pockets." The women grumbled but did as they were told, which showed the large woman was evidently the madam of the establishment.

They proceeded forward and around the corner. The hall before them stretched out to the very end of the deep building, and

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there were many doors on either side. The rooms were small and very few of them were meant to be occupied for any long periods of time. Louisa led them to the very end and stopped at the corner suite. From the distance between the door and the wall in the back, it was apparent this was a larger room than the others. She opened the door and stepped inside to reveal a very luxurious and pink room.

The walls were covered in a fine gold and pink wallpaper, and the furniture, which included a couple of chairs and a couch, matched the walls. There were thick rugs spun with pink yarn and miscellaneous articles of vases and mirrors which were painted or lined with pink material. It made Violet want to laugh aloud in admiration for the decorator's bold move, but Will only felt abhorrence. However, sitting on the couch was the person they'd been seeking.

He was a man of about forty-five with hair tinted with blond streaks from his life in the sun. A few wrinkles dotted the corners of his eyes and mouth, but he was lean and athletic due to the strenuous nature of his work. However, his hands were worn with care and aged well beyond the rest of him, showing he'd dealt with tough rigging in his day. He smiled when Will stepped inside, and from the look of his ruffled hair he had apparently just woken up.

"How are you, Will?" he greeted his friend as he held out his hand. Will gladly took it and smiled in his turn, but something troubled him. The captain felt as though he'd been expecting him to arrive, and thus was not at all surprised by their coming.

"Fine, but I'm in need of a boat to get us to at least as far as Buffalo," Will explained, and he nodded toward Violet.

"Well, well, finally got yourself a lady friend?" the captain asked. He glanced over to the young girl and kindly smiled. "Glad to meet you, miss."

"Call me Violet," she graciously replied.

"And my name is Captain John Johnson," he returned, and

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he laughed at her quizzical expression. She wasn't sure if he was being serious or was using an alias. "It's my real name, I assure you. My parents had very little imagination."

"Everyone 'round here calls him Captain Johnny," Louisa chimed in as she sat down at his side.

"Yes, well, now that the pleasantries are over, you said something about a boat?" Captain Johnny asked his guests.

"We haven't much time left to speak tonight, but we need your packet boat to take us to New York," Will repeated, but in a quicker tone. His eyes were pointedly glancing between the captain and his female companion. He had no idea if the woman was privy to their being vampires, or at least as privy as the captain. Captain Johnny still needed to be told about Violet.

"That's a fair piece to travel. I suppose you're trying to get to Caleb's place?" Captain Johnny asked him, and Will nodded. "Well, I suppose Louisa here can put you up, can't you, dear?"

"Oh, of course, there's plenty of rooms they can use," she readily agreed with a bright smile on her face. She turned her jolly eyes on Violet, who blushed under her gentle but firm scrutiny. "Will the young lady be needing her own room?"

"I think in this case they'll be rooming together," Captain Johnny mused. There was a knowing smile on his face as he pulled a flask from his hip and took a drink. Will wondered at the action. Like all the men who worked on the canals the captain partook in a lot of liquor, but he'd never seen the man carry a container at his side. The captain noticed where Will's eyes lay, and stowed the flask back onto his belt. "Been feeling some pains lately, and that soothes them for a while." The vampire was hardly amused by the captain's smirk, but his nautical friend took Will's sour attitude with patience. "And none of those frowns toward my lady, William Stewart. Louisa's all right, aren't you, dear?"

"If you're meaning about them being vampires, they can stay so long as they don't cause a ruckus," Louisa answered. She waved her hand as though she were waving away their undead

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existence.

"See? Nothing to it," the captain replied. "If you've got any horses to take care of, better do it before you get yourselves burned. Violet can stay here with Louisa while I get my boatmen ready to get out of here tomorrow."

"Then we have an agreement?" Will asked, and the captain shook his head as he stood from the couch. He still had his smile on his lips.

"You ever try not to be so serious, Will?" the older man wondered at his friend.

"This is more serious than usual, Captain," the vampire countered, and Captain Johnny frowned at the tone. "We have followers." That caught the captain's full attention.

"I see. Did you want to leave tonight? I could take your coffin to the docks myself and wait till the next night before loading you."

"If you want to take the risk. The roads are no doubt being watched," Will warned him. His old friend brushed off the risk with a shrug as the captain folded his arms across his chest.

"Well, what's a little fun every now and then?" the captain challenged with a chuckle. "And since you've caught me in a boring slump, I think I'll take you up on your offer of a little excitement."

"Better get moving then," Louisa interrupted, and she herself rose to her feet. "All this talking's not getting you folks any closer to getting out of here."

"You heard the lady." Captain Johnny laughed, and he steered his two companions toward the door. He opened the portal and everyone was surprised when something orange and white sat in the doorway. "What have we here?" he wondered in amazement. He turned to his lady friend. "You got a cat, Louisa?"

"He's mine," Violet told him, and she reached down to scoop him up in her arms. She glanced between the captain and Will. "Is it all right if he comes aboard with us, Captain Johnny?"

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"Well, well, you've certainly picked yourself up quite the group here, Will," he complimented. There was a twinkle in his eyes, and he reached out to give the cat a pet on the head. "Sailors consider these guys saviors. They keep the ship clean of mice, so he's more than welcome to come aboard any ship I command."

Violet smiled and Will had one less problem with which to deal. Then the three were shoved out into the empty hall, and the captain took hold of the door.

"Just let me get my stuff and I'll be right out." With that Captain Johnny shut the door and the two vampires were left in some confusion on Violet's part, and some consternation on Will's mind.

"He's going to be our captain?" Violet whispered to her companion. She had her doubts as to his reliability. The young woman jerked back in surprise when she heard a loud tumble of something heavy falling inside the room. However, Will only sighed and regretfully nodded his head.

"He may not look like much, but he's the best captain on the canals." Unfortunately sometimes even he had his doubts about the man.

Just at that moment the door flew open and Captain Johnny stepped out. He was slipping his arms into a long, dark overcoat. His hair was even messier than before and he had smudges of pink lipstick all over his face. Will glanced at him with a questioning expression.

"Are you ready now?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," the captain replied with his wide grin. "Now before I get too deep into this, mind telling me what we're up against?"

"Vampires," Will answered, and the captain frowned.

"I thought you folks were supposed to get along," he wondered, and he led them down the hall while they spoke

"These ones seem intent on doing us harm."

Any further conversation was cut short as they entered the

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boisterous saloon. Captain Johnny navigated his way through the crowd and out into the streets. As Will had predicted, the horses stood exactly where they had been left.

"You still have that old carriage?" Captain Johnny asked, and he stepped over to it.

"It's reliable," Will defended while his old friend looked the horses over.

"I'll need to make a few stops in town to get my men together, but that shouldn't take too long. Then we can be off to the banks of the canal," the captain informed his passengers. The captain frowned when he tried to pet the horses and they pulled away from his hand. He glanced over to the vampire. "Will they obey me, or are they only fond of your kind?"

"They'll follow you if I'm aboard." Will stepped up to the steeds. He put his hand on their soft muzzles and looked into their eyes. In the presence of their owner, they grew calm. "He will take you further on the road," he whispered to the horses. "Then you can rest there. Do you understand?" The horses didn't go so far as to nod their heads, but they stood still enough that the captain ventured to reach out for their reins. The animals hardly blinked as he took them in his hand.

"You got some sort of hypnotism or whatnot over them?" Captain Johnny asked. "Or you been feeding them yer blood to get them to behave the way ya want?"

"Neither, they're merely attached to me."

"Well, well, quite a group indeed," Captain Johnny mused as he gave a side glance at Will. "Know any place where I can pick up one of these horses?"

"Maybe later we can chat, but we have more pressing matters," Will reminded his old friend. "The vampires who are following us are in a carriage much like this one."

"Really?" the sailor wondered, and the tone of his voice caught Will's attention. "Doesn't that beat all."

"Do you know something of them?" Will asked the man,

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who shrugged.

"You know how fast bad news travels in these parts. There's been a fair share of murders south of here these last few nights," Captain Johnny told them. His voice had dropped to a whisper, for the streets were still busy with the night folk. "One of the men, a deputy, was found with his throat ripped out and his body drained of blood. Word got to us this morning that a hotel keep in Columbus had his neck sliced open and his blood drained. I'm sure you had to pass through there just last night, and a carriage a lot like yours was spotted around both areas just before the bodies were found."

"I'm sure that carriage was created to be a near-perfect doppelganger. So you were expecting us here because you assumed I'd gotten out of hand?" Will guessed.

"I'll admit the thought crossed my mind, but I had faith that you wouldn't be that reckless," the captain admitted. He glanced around the busy street and noted the time. "But shouldn't you two be getting in that carriage? I don't really want to be having to explain to everybody 'round here why I'm cleaning up your ash and not your bodies."

The man's warning was accentuated by the faint glow in the sky. Will escorted Violet into the carriage and the curtains were securely fastened where they would not come open, even on the roughest of roads. It wasn't as safe as the coffin, but for a day it would work for their needs. As the carriage lurched forward the two sat opposite one another, with the cat laying comfortably on Violet's lap. She was troubled by this latest news.

"Do you think the man we met was the same one who was found dead?" she asked her companion.

"Only if they have identified him improperly," Will replied as he leaned back in his padded seat. He cupped his chin in one hand and leaned to the side as he thought over the news. "The man we met was a sheriff, not a deputy, but this doesn't bode well for us."

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"Why? We haven't done anything wrong."

"The authorities may not see it that way," he pointed out. "They know only that one of their own is dead and a carriage much like our own was around the same area." He growled and pounded his fist against the side of the carriage. Violet started back, and he sighed. "It appears our adversaries have thought out how best to slow our progress."

"So those other vampires killed him?" she asked, and he nodded. She was horrified at the idea that anyone would kill a person only for the sake of stalling them. "But that...that's evil!"

"Our kind are as prone to evil as mankind," Will philosophized. "But we must worry more about ourselves now than before. We had only a few men looking for us, but now revenge may be a factor in their search."

"You mean the sheriff coming after us?" she guessed.

"And any lawman who feels personally insulted at the deputy's death, and who's following your trail with that hotel owner," he answered, and he glanced over to her. "They might believe you are involved, too, and will not think of taking you back with them if they believe you're as much a threat as myself."

Violet shuddered and glanced away. What Will was trying to tell her was the next time they met the sheriff, he wouldn't be fearful of involving her in a gunfight. There would no longer be any hesitation to use firearms. Will, for his part, moved over to sit beside her. She started at him sitting so close and tried to make as much room as possible, but she let out a small yelp when he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her against him.

"Very little can kill you, remember?" he whispered as she sat stiff against his chest. "But nothing stops the pain when you're shot." His words only worsened her discomfort as she practically froze in his arms, and he sighed. "You will be fine. I won't allow anyone to harm you."

"Perhaps you shouldn't make such promises," Violet countered, but there was a smile on her face as she turned to look

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up at him. "Those are hard to keep when we have so many gunmen after us."

"Yes, I suppose you're right." The sun was in the sky now and he could see she was growing tired. "You should sleep, though. We have only a short ride and then under darkness we'll change onto the boat."

"I guess..." she agreed. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against his chest.

Even Violet's feline quieted down from purring as she drifted off into sleep. The cat's blue eyes looked at Violet for a moment before they turned up to Will, and its tail excitedly twitched. The vampire was a little surprised by the intense stare of the beast, and his own eyes narrowed. He wondered if there wasn't something wrong with the feline before its eyes lazily drooped. It curled itself into a ball on Violet's lap, and then all was quiet and still.

Chapter 13

Will didn't allow himself a minute of sleep while they traveled through the bustling port town. As warned, Captain Johnny made a few calls before they headed out onto the main road, mainly to inform his men to meet him close to the docks. The horses obeyed him well, and they were glad for a restful trot along the route rather than the near-breakneck speed Will had forced them to travel these last two nights.

They reached the start of the canal leading along the Ohio River in a short while. Will greatly desired to glimpse the surroundings for threats, but there was no way he could safely perform such an action. He was forced to depend on the sensibilities of his friend to keep the carriage safe until it could be loaded secretly onto the captain's packet boat. Will was very much surprised, then, when the carriage stopped and there was a knock on the door.

"You can come out if you want," Captain Johnny invited. "The sun don't shine much in here."

Will gently lay Violet down on the wide carriage seat, disturbing the cat in her lap, and opened the door. He was pleased to see the carriage had been driven into a secure warehouse, and the smell of water told him they were close to the dock.

"So what's the plan, Will?" the captain asked as his vampiric friend glanced around. "We going to just sneak out of here all nice and quiet?"

"The vampires following us have no qualms about killing those who get in their way, so to avoid needless bloodshed a quiet escape would be best," Will agreed.

"Well, I suppose that leaves out using the dynamite as a distraction," the man mused, and he took another drink from his flask.

Meanwhile, Will sidled up to the door and closed his eyes to focus his attention on the world outside. The sounds of heavy

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carts and light carriages was incessant. People came and went, some yelling orders and others chatting about topics as mundane as the weather to serious questions about the heavy traffic clogging the canals. There was nothing of use to Will, however, and he turned back to Captain Johnny.

"Your men will be ready to go as soon as night falls?" he asked, and the captain nodded.

"Yep, that's the signal they're waiting for to board the ship," Captain Johnny answered him. "We should be a few miles out before anyone knows we're gone."

Will suddenly felt something was amiss, and he froze as he tried to focus his attention on the entire area surrounding the warehouse. Someone was approaching the building from the back, and he caught sight of a shadow which flitted across the boards.

"Perhaps we should keep on our guard still," Will commented. He caught the captain's attention and nodded toward the back of the warehouse.

Captain Johnny was no fool, and he understood the glance from his companion. He nodded and put his fingers to his lips. In a moment he blasted a whistle from his lips and the shadow took off. For a moment Will was angry at their prey having escaped until he heard boots running after the spy and the sound of a scuffle not more than a street down.

"You might want to get back from the door," Captain Johnny instructed as several shadows now passed along the side wall of the building.

Will hid at the front of the carriage just before the door was banged open. There was the sound of feet kicking and the muffled cries of outrage from some unknown person. Then the captain walked over and slammed the door shut behind the small group, and Will was able to safely come out of his hiding place. He wasn't at all surprised to see two burly men, part of Captain Johnny's crew, holding between them Hanson's coachman.

"He won't tell us what he was doing there, captain," one of

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the men informed their leader. He jostled the coachman, but the man could hardly argue since there was a piece of cloth stuffed into his mouth. "A noisy gentleman, too. We had to shut him up before someone heard him."

"I'm guessing from your face you know this man," Captain Johnny mused. Will walked passed him to stand in front of the captured human.

"He belongs to the carriage seen around where the deputy and hotel owner were murdered," Will answered.

He looked the man over and scowled when something appeared to be off. He reached out and pulled down the coachman's collar to reveal nothing but untouched skin. The coachman smiled through his cloth muzzle, but Will would not be deterred. His eyes glanced lower and the closer he came to the man's wrist, the more fervent were the coachman's struggles with the burly boatmen. Will pulled the other man's arm out and pushed up his clothes and sleeves. His eyes narrowed when he glimpsed a thin, faint mark along the skin above the veins.

"Something wrong?" Captain Johnny wondered as he stepped up beside Will. He noticed the old wound, and he, too, comprehended the problem. "So this guy's got some blood in him of one of those vampires chasing you?"

"Yes, and no doubt the connection through that blood is allowing Hanson and his acquaintances the privilege of seeing us," Will informed him. The men holding the coachman were apparently learned enough to know what this all meant, because they stuck fast when the captive tried with more greater to free himself. "Let him go," Will commanded the men. They were so surprised they looked to their captain for a confirmation.

"Do as he says," Captain Johnny answered with a shrug. It was always worth following Will's commands, if only to see what he had planned.

The men released their prisoner but stepped back to the door so he could not escape out that exit. The coachman was very

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confused by this new turn of events, and his legs quaked beneath him as Will stood over him. Will reached out and pulled the cloth from the man's mouth.

"Why are you following us, Hanson?" Will asked the man.

The boatmen looked on in surprise as the coachman, once cowering and shaking, suddenly straightened. A grin familiar to Will slid onto the prisoner's face, and he also crossed his arms over his chest. Captain Johnny took a step back and grabbed at the gun on his hip.

"Come, come, we only want to be friendly," the coachman spoke. The voice still belonged to the body, but the words were coming from another person. "No need to be so brutal to my little puppet here."

"This is the last warning I will allow you," Will replied. "Do not follow, or I will not hesitate to destroy you."

"Now, now, no threatening your own kind," the puppet teased as he wagged his finger at Will. "What would you say if we commented on the beauty of your young fledgling and what a pity it would be if something were to happen to her?"

As the last of those words left the man's lips, Will's hand shot out and he grasped the coachman by the neck. The air in the warehouse was charged with Will's fury as his face contorted with anger and disgust. The corners inside the building darkened and the vampire's eyes were alight with an unnatural glow. He pulled the coachman toward him so that their faces were mere inches from one another. The human's face reflected the shock Hanson felt as Will's fangs lengthened and his lips turned up in a growl.

"Whatever plans you have, Hanson, you will have one less puppet to control."

The coachman's eyes widened and he tried to cry out for mercy before his voice was cut short by the sound of his neck snapping. The air was completely silent, and the crew gaped in horror as the body was unceremoniously dropped to the ground. Captain Johnny dropped his hand away from his gun and stepped

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up beside his friend.

"You really know how to send a message, don't you?" he asked. He tapped the end of his boots against the dead man's body. "I suppose we'd better deal with this guy after dark, too, or I'll be in trouble." He glanced over to his dumbfounded men. "Drag him over into the corner and hide him with whatever junk you can find. We'll put him in the canal when night falls." They didn't move for a moment, and the captain scowled. "Get on now, boys, don't dawdle all day."

"Y-yes, sir," they stumbled to reply. They got to work dragging the body behind a large sheet of wood and covering the remains as best they could.

"You sure that was a good idea?" the captain asked Will. "Maybe we could've gotten something out of him." Will shook his head.

"The man had blood dripping from his nose," Will explained, and his foot kicked the ground where a smudge of blood lay. "The connection between the man and Hanson was killing him. He would have been dead in a few minutes."

"And that fellow Hanson, he knew that?" his friend guessed, and Will nodded. "So he's not above killing his own man," Captain Johnny noted. There was evident disgust in his voice.

"We're dealing with two very dangerous vampires, and perhaps a third if their dirty companion joins them," Will agreed.

Will suddenly heard a soft meow and glanced down at his feet. Violet's feline was sitting there with its eyes staring up at him. When it realized it had caught his attention, the creature looked over to the carriage and he followed its gaze. The window to the carriage door was open. He hadn't opened it.

Will strode over and flung wide the door. Violet sat in the far corner, awake and crying softly. Will's absence and the sounds of their voices had awoken her, and she had looked out in time to see the murder. That had been the first time she'd seen him kill a

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man. He wished he could promise it would be the last, but he suspected their adversaries wouldn't stop until one group was dead. Her eyes looked at him with fear, and when he climbed up into the carriage she flinched and squished back into the corner.

"It's all right, Violet, I won't hurt you," he consoled her as he slid inside.

"How...how could you kill him?" she choked out. "He hadn't done anything."

"He was dead before I killed him," Will answered, and her fear was replaced with confusion. "I told you vampires could control others with their blood, do you remember that?" She hesitantly nodded her head. "The connection is sometimes so much strain on the human's body that they are killed by the control. The man was dying as we were speaking, I only ended it sooner for him."

"Did he have to die at all?" Violet couldn't understand any of this. Why were these people after them, and why did they want to destroy them? She looked into Will's eyes. "What aren't you telling me?" Will paused and then made to reply, but he closed his mouth without saying a word.

"You may as well tell her the full truth, Will," Captain Johnny quipped from the door. He took another swig from his flask and smiled at his friend. "Won't do to be keeping secrets from the people you're supposed to be protecting."

"What's he talking about, Will?" Violet questioned. Her protector turned to her and sighed.

"My guardian has lived for many lifetimes," he explained. "He's made many enemies over the centuries, as have I. The men who follow us now are from a group of vampires who in the past have had disagreements with our bloodline. We've killed many of their progeny to protect ourselves. They've perhaps seen you as a way to fulfill some of their lust for revenge." She cringed at his words, but she wanted to know the full truth.

"And if they caught me, what would they do with me?"

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"Best not to ask those types of questions, missy. Sometimes you really don't want to know what the answers are," Captain Johnny scolded as he shook his head. He peeked out to corner where the men were finishing up their gruesome task. "I suppose that's one less man of their group, but they've got others. I'm surprised your guardian in New York hasn't taken care of that murderous gang they've got set up in the city."

"They've kept their distance from us until these last few years, and Caleb is slow to react to some changes," Will admitted. He glanced over to Violet, and his eyes softened. "Believe me when I only wanted to shield you from the danger. This was never meant to become so dangerous."

"I-I know," she stumbled out. She smiled at him. The truth felt better to know, but she was still afraid. "I just...I just never expected to be caught up in someone else's battle."

"We'll be safe when we reach Caleb's home," he reassured her frightened eyes. "And I'll make sure you safely reach there."

"Not without you," Violet insisted, as she'd immediately caught a hidden meaning in his words. "I won't be able to find my way unless you're with me."

"Yes, well, that's one promise I can't make." The cat suddenly jumped up on the seat space between them and it mewed at them both. Violet tried to hide her giggle, which she thought inappropriate for the serious situation, but Will was glad for it.

"Aren't you two getting a little ahead of yourselves?" Captain Johnny interrupted their scene. "We haven't even gotten you onto the water and you're talking about getting yourselves killed." He stood straight and grinned. "You just wait and see how ol' Captain Johnny will treat anyone who tries to come aboard. They'll know what's coming to them quick."

"Well, captain, we had better prepare as best we can," Will replied as he turned to the man. "Our enemies know we mean to take your boat tonight, but without their human servant their plans may be forced to change. Their uncertainty may give us the

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advantage. Can you get the carriage and horses on the boat right now and push us off immediately?"

"Yep, you three just hold still in here and I'll get you on the boat before you know it," the captain agreed with a nod.

"What about the man?" Violet wondered, and she glanced between the two men. "Can we not bury him?" she asked, and the captain shook his head.

"Best to leave him there, miss," Captain Johnny explained. "It'd be too obvious to give him a burial at sea and we don't have time to dig 'em a hole." With that he stepped back and fastened the door shut.

They heard the captain yell orders to his men and the doors to the warehouse were opened. The carriage slowly retreated out of the building, and then they were on the road the short distance to the peers. Violet held her hands in her lap as they sped along, and she was surprised when a hand settled atop her own. She glanced up into Will's face.

"You think too much of others when you have yourself to worry about," Will kindly scolded. She smiled.

"Perhaps it is because I have you to watch over me, and they have no one," she replied, and to emphasize her point the old cat nestled itself against her.

"Yes, well, I suppose you have more in common with Caleb than even I had guessed," her guardian returned with his own smile.

They were interrupted by the slowing of the horses and the distinguishable change in the sounds of their hoofs beating against a wooden surface rather than dirt. They had reached the water's edge and were climbing aboard the packet boat. Violet took hold of Will's arm as the carriage swayed a little, and then they set upon the boat. There was much shouting from Captain Johnny as he ordered his men to take hold of the tow lines before the boat disembarked from the pier.

"Do you think we will make it far?" Violet asked her

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guardian.

"Maybe a dozen miles before the sun sets, and then we will have to watch the bank for any signs of the other vampires," Will answered.

"Only that far?" she exclaimed. "Why did we not stay with the road?"

"The horses could not have kept up, and the weather was kind to us," he explained while he closed his eyes. He listened to the rustling of the waters as they were pushed off from the bank and the general yelling when their towline was caught by the hoggees, the men who dragged the boat along the canal with their team of oxen. "Any rain and we would have been delayed by several days." He heard nothing to catch his attention, and turned his eyes on his young charge. "The canal system is also the most direct route to New York. Our greatest disadvantage is our inability to maneuver when we are on the water, but we are able to depart at many of the towns along the canal."

"Do you think they will follow us along the bank?"

"Undoubtedly. They sacrificed an important minion to gather that information. They would be fools not to use it," Will replied as he leaned back in his seat.

They had only now to wait and see what course of action their adversaries would take, and counter as best they could. The remaining hours of the day ticked by, and Will both feared and welcomed the night when it succeeded the sun. They had the ability to protect themselves now, but their enemies were no doubt awake and on the move after them. He made sure they were at their best by having both of them, Violet and himself, take a full glass of blood. When he was sure the sun had completely set, Will opened the carriage door and let them out into the fresh night air. Their captain was on the deck waiting for them.

"Welcome to the Louisa!" Captain Johnny proclaimed as he gestured to the boat around them.

It was the usual packet boat, but still an oddity for Violet.

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The dimensions were roughly ninety feet in length by fifteen feet in width. There was plenty of room for their carriage, and the horses had been unhitched. They stood a few feet toward the bow with their reins secured to a few upright beams, and some hay was spread out for food and bedding. The center of the boat was occupied by a squat cabin used as the living quarters for the crew and passengers. On the deck at the port side lay the removable mast pole for when their journey took them to the lakes where there would be no canal towline, and the canvas used for the sails was safely stowed in the cabin. Violet noticed there were shovels and some strange, short lengths of wood tipped with metal balls leaning against the side of the cabin.

"She may not look like much, but she'll get you to where you need to go along these canals," he proudly told them.

"The Louisa?" Will repeated. He distinctly remembered that being the name of the large madam at Akron.

"It's a big boat named after a big lady," the captain joked with a wink. Violet covered her mouth to hide her amusement. "Just don't tell Louisa I told you that."

"Your secret is safe with us," the older vampire promised him. He didn't even wish to imagine the firestorm which would come out of that revelation. "How many miles have we made?"

"I'd say almost thirty miles, so we've only got some seven miles left before we reach Cleveland," Captain Johnny replied, and he glanced up the river. "We haven't had to make room for many other boats and we've got a good team pulling us." He nodded toward the shore where a team of four oxen was pulling at the towline. "I figured you'd compensate me if I bought a few more oxen than usual to get us along."

"A good idea," Will complimented. His eyes traveled along the thick trees beside the canal. "Any sign of them?"

"If you're meaning that coach that looks like yours, not yet," the captain answered with a shake of his head. He took another swig from his flask, and Violet wondered how after so

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many drinks he could still be standing. "But then the night's only just started."

With that piece of advice on all their minds, the banks were watched with apprehension. However, Violet, who had never before been on a boat of any consequence, wandered along the deck. She was intensely shy around the crew, a group of five burley men, and she didn't trust herself to interact with them and possibly reveal her dark secret. At the rounded bow she, though, found another of the boat's crew, a man about thirty with a long pair of whiskers and a friendly smile. His eyes were alert and his movements quick, showing he'd been on boats for the majority of his life and had learned to survive on them.

"This must be your first time on a boat," he teased when she stopped a few feet from him. His voice was soft but commanding, and she imagined he was terrifying to behold when he raised his tone.

"It is, but how can you tell?" Violet asked. He nodded toward her place on the boat, which was in the perfect center.

"You don't get near the edge at all, miss, and whenever the boat moves you look about ready to take a tumble," the man replied with a grin. She blushed at her so obvious naivety. "None of that now," the sailor ordered when he noticed her embarrassment. "You'll get your legs by the time we've reached the Erie Canal."

"Yes, but I don't know how to swim either," she admitted. She was afraid he would laugh at her, but the kind smile still held fast on his face.

"I don't think that much bothers your kind," the second mate commented as he gave her a wink. "No breath to worry about."

"So you...you know what I am?" Violet asked in a whisper, and she glanced back where the other crew members stood.

"Don't you worry none about the gents on this boat," he replied when he noticed her look. Nothing was missed by his keen

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eyes. "We all know about the captain's friends and their doings, and any friend of the captain's is a friend worth having."

"Thank you." It felt good to find such a friendly group like Jim had been to help them along on their journey. Then she recalled her manners, and gave him a small curtsy which caught him off guard. "My name's Violet Feld. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"My name's Rob Stover, Miss Feld, second mate on this boat," he returned with a less elegant bow. "Pleasure speaking with you."

"How deep is the canal?" Violet asked. She cautiously stepped to the edge of the boat.

"At least four feet, Miss Feld, but deeper in some spots."

Will suddenly joined them, as he had noticed her brave steps, and came to see that she didn't fall over. The water depth wasn't deep enough to endanger her existence, but the delay in scooping her out would slow them down. He looked at the second mate with a suspicious, and somewhat jealous, glance.

"Good evening," Rob greeted, but all he got was an indifferent glare. The second mate tipped his cap at them both, and turned his attention back to the bow. He could tell jealousy when he glimpsed it.

"That was rude," Violet scolded as she scowled at her companion.

"Don't grow too intimate with humans," Will countered, and he looked at the passing trees beyond the canal towline. However, Violet was still angry with his behavior.

"But if there are so few of us, who am I to speak to? You can hardly expect me to stay at your side forever."

"No, but I expect you to heed my advice and avoid social interactions with mortals," Will repeated. He turned his head to look down at her, and his eyes were firm in his convictions. "They are more bitter than sweet."

"So what am I to do? Merely have these business

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relationships you have built up?" she questioned as she threw up her arms in disgust. "What sort of life is that to live? What sort of cold, detached monster will I become?" She noticed him suddenly stiffen, and she realized she had taken her objections too far. "I didn't mean you, Will," she hurriedly apologized. "I just-"

"It's fine," he replied, and he glanced away.

"Will, I'm truly sorry," Violet insisted. She stepped between him and the short distance to the water. "Please, I didn't mean to say you were such a man."

"Perhaps you're right in some regards," Will grudgingly agreed.

The boat suddenly shifted and Violet lost her footing. There were no railings to the boat, only a foot tall wall around the sides, and against this she fell back. Her eyes widened as she felt herself tip over the side toward the dark, bottomless water. Time slowed as she thought of the horrible fate awaiting her. The current would grab her and take her far away, and she wouldn't be found before the sun doomed her to a burning, agonizing death.

Then her hand was caught, and she was swiftly pulled against a strong, cool chest. If her heart still beat it would have pounded her ears, but instead her hands trembled as she gripped Will's shirt. Tears slid down her face while she gasped for needless air. His arms were wrapped around her and they were in the center of the boat now, far from the edge.

"Don't do that again," he ordered her, and his voice was full of concern. She giggled, a nervous, twittering sound, and then she glanced up into his face with a small smile on her lips.

"S-see?" she managed to stutter out through her diminishing fear. "You're not so awful."

"Here you two are playing around when we have bigger problems to handle," Captain Johnny told them as he quickly reached their side. He pointed to a spot a hundred yards down the towpath. "Is that the carriage you've been looking for?"

Will frowned as he gently pulled Violet to the side and

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stepped up to the edge of the boat. He looked to the road and saw the chestnut horses driving the elegant coach their way. In the box sat a tall, thin man and at his side was a heavier gentleman. Hanson and Steiner. They were coming.

Chapter 14

"Brace your men!" Will yelled, and Captain Johnny knew from his voice they'd been found.

Will didn't need to guess how the carriage had caught up to them, for he watched them a body was tossed off the roof of the carriage. They had hired a temporary human driver, and now did away with him in their usual murderous fashion.

The demonic horses were fast catching them as they sped along the towpath. In a minute the coach had overtaken the slow oxen, and before those on the boat could call out in warning Hanson stood from the box. Will realized their plan too late. They were to kill the hoggees and their animals, and thus render the packet boat dead in the water. Will turned to Violet, who stood back with her hands clasped in front of her.

"Stay here," he commanded, and she nodded her head.

Then Will returned his gaze to the towpath in time to see Hanson jump down off the carriage box and run ahead of their horses. Steiner grabbed the loose reins and pulled the vehicle back to a stop along the side of the boat. Steiner turned to grin at Will as though daring him to stop them. Will didn't need a second invitation.

Violet watched as Will took a few steps back. Then his movements were too quick for her to follow as he ran forward to the edge of the boat. At the side board he launched himself high into the air. His feet cleared the few feet over the water and the six yards of the canal wall to land cleanly onto the towpath. Will shot himself toward the oxen and hoggees where Hanson was already thick among them. Violet turned away at the horrible cries of man and beast as Hanson attempted to murder the tow crew and their animals. Will ripped him away from the tow workers and their oxen, and threw Hanson toward the thick woods.

Hanson landed on his legs and stood up from the dusty ground. The tall vampire scowled at his wily opponent. Will

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turned to the hoggees and their animals. The men were relatively unharmed and, freed from their assaulter, had fled the scene. The animals, however, were quite injured and Will wasn't sure if they would live to see another sunrise.

"You would hurt one of your own?" Hanson scolded in false outrage.

"I won't pretend to believe your intentions here are pure," Will shot back. "You have followed us to destroy us. Anything else you say is a lie or a waste of my time." His opponent was amused by Will's pronouncement.

"Then I suppose it won't hurt to tell you that we mean to take you alive, provided you cooperate."

"I would still call you a liar," Will replied.

Will had one eye on the quick vampire, and another on the boat. Hanson would have no sharing of the young man's attentions, however, and he sprinted forward. Will was unprepared for the volley of blows which Hanson delivered, and more than one found their mark on his face and chest. The young man stumbled back while his tall adversary grinned with glee at his initial attack.

"Focus, Mr. Stewart," Hanson advised as he stretched himself to his full height. "We wouldn't want you to perish so unnecessarily. What sport would that be for me?"

"I don't care how I disappoint you," Will spat back. He raised his hand and wiped away some of the blood from the corner of his mouth. He needed to focus on his opponent. The captain would take care of Violet.

"That's it, that's the fear and anger I was wishing to see." Hanson looked into Will's eyes and laughed. The young man wouldn't be intimidated, though, and so he smirked.

"You won't win this fight," Will informed the other vampire. The grin on Hanson's face slipped away and turned into a scowl. "And whatever your reasons and for whom you are harming me and my own, I will find the answers."

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"Then you won't find your answers, for they're passed me," Hanson challenged.

The two vampires raced toward each other at the same time and the pair collided in a frenzy of swinging arms. They each dodged their opponent's attacks and returned each volley with their own fists. Hanson opened his hands and splayed his long, talon-like nails across Will's chest. The nails dug through his clothes and cut deep into his skin. Will clutched at his chest to stop the bleeding, and Hanson was able to grab his shoulders. The young man was swung in a half circle and then released. The momentum flung him into the woods, and Will crashed into one of the large trees along the towline path. He fell to the ground on his stomach.

Will coughed when the dust from his landing rose up around him. A pair of elegant shoes stepped close to his face, and he glanced up to see Hanson standing over him. That smirk was back on the tall vampire's face, and he knelt down for a good look at his fallen opponent.

"That was much too simple a task," Hanson scolded as he shook his head. "Did your guardian teach you nothing of fighting?"

"He taught me this," Will replied.

Using his hands which lay palms down on the ground, Will lifted his entire body a few inches off the ground, and swung his legs to his left and into Hanson's right side. Hanson's precarious position caused him to knock onto the ground and gave Will a chance to climb to his feet. Hanson clambered to his feet, too, and growled at his opponent. It was Will's turn to be amused, with a smirk crossing his lips.

"Would you like to see more?"

Will didn't wait for a reply before he dug the point of one of his shoes beneath a long stick at his feet. In one swift motion he kicked the wood into the air and caught it while Hanson lunged at him. Now Hanson had to contend with an armed opponent as Will deftly used the wood to block his blows. Will deflected

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Hanson's strikes, and the vampire's claws tore into the wood rather than Will's own flesh. Unfortunately the stick was growing more fragile with each blow, and Will knew he needed to end this bout soon. The blood from the wounds on his chest was still flowing, and he could feel his limbs growing heavy as his mind clouded over. He saw his opponent's weakness, however, in Hanson's emphasis on using his nails as daggers.

On the next strike with Hanson's nails, Will angled the wood so the tall vampire's fingers came down on the flattest side. With the force of his blow Hanson found his hand stuck in the stick, and the entrapment caught him enough unaware enough that he staggered back with Will releasing the piece of wood. That gave Will time to find another stick, this one longer and pointed on one end. Hanson flung off the wood from his fingers and turned to find Will directly in front of him. A gasp of air suddenly pushed out of Hanson's chest, and his eyes widened.

"Tolerable...skills..." Hanson coughed out, and he glanced down at his chest.

Will had used the wood as a stake, and had driven the stick into Hanson's heart. The young man stumbled back and collapsed onto the ground while Hanson clutched at the wood with both hands. Hanson's blood spurted from the wound and his terrible howls filled the air. Will raised himself from the dirt high enough to watch Hanson's body fall into dust. In a few seconds the stake had nothing to support it, and it clattered to the ground onto a pile of ash. Hanson was defeated, but Will felt the blood flowing too freely from his body. He was losing consciousness as his body attempted to exert all its energy to healing itself. The world blacked out, but one final thought struck him as his eyes closed. He hoped Violet was safe.

On the boat just after Will had jumped from it, Violet caught sight of something from the carriage. She turned to see

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Steiner drop the reins and stand atop the box. His long fangs flashed in the light of the clear sky, and he looked over the boat and all those aboard. His eyes finally settled on Violet, and her own widened in horror when he crouched down atop the vehicle. Then he propelled himself high into the air and landed on the boat not more than a few yards from her. The packet boat rocked with the man's weight, and water spilled over both sides. Steiner stood and gave a deep bow to the lady.

"Good evening, mein Fraulein," he greeted. "I believe mein companion would have me keep some promises about your safety."

Any further talk was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a shovel swung at Steiner's head. The portly vampire was barely able to dodge the weapon, and was forced to jump toward the bow of the ship. Steiner turned and growled at his attacker, and Violet was shocked to see that the person who had moved at such an incredible speed was Captain Johnny. The captain stood to his full height and clanged the shovel in his open palm. His lips were turned down in disgust as he looked Steiner over with narrow eyes.

"Get the hell off my boat," Captain Johnny growled.

"Mein Gott, vhat disgusting filz you are, Watcher," Steiner scowled as he turned his nose up at the captain. "But I haf no time to play vit you. Move out of mein way, or I vill be forced to trow you from your own boot."

"I'd like to see you try," Captain Johnny dared. A smirk spread across his lips as his men came up behind him. "Even with your strength you can't handle us all."

"You speak some trut here, dirt blood," his hefty opponent jollily laughed, and then he glanced over at the carriage. The demonic horses still stood beside the unmoving boat, and the door to the vehicle opened. Out stepped the ragged vampire Violet had already met, Nic Emilian. "I believe you are familiar viz zis gentleman, mein Fraulein."

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Nic grinned at the group, and he made the same great leap across the gap and landed clumsily onto the boat. Steiner's lips curled up in disgust as he glanced over to his ragamuffin companion, but he had more pressing business. The small crew was gathered by Stover, and they wielded pieces of the stout poles of wood Violet had earlier noticed leaning against the cabin. The men encircled the vampires.

"I'll give you pirates one more warning," Captain Johnny called out to the intruders. His eyes were on Steiner, who he believed to be the most dangerous of the two, and he raised his shovel. "Get off or you'll regret it."

"So you think yer a match for us?" Nic challenged the humans. His hands at his sides twitched as he hungrily looked at the prospective food. Steiner, for his part, laughed at the ragged crew and woman.

"Ze vill not proov to be much good for us," Steiner spoke with derision in his voice.

"Shut up and find out how well we can fight you demons," Captain Johnny accepted the danger.

"I believe I would prefer oter enjoyments," the pudgy vampire answered, and he looked to Violet.

Violet gasped when Steiner was swiftly in front of her, but the captain was having none of that. Captain Johnny moved as fast as the vampire, and inserted himself between the young woman and her attacker. The captain swung out his shovel and this time the metal connected with the pale flesh of their enemy's face. Violet was shocked when the vampire screamed out in agony and staggered backward. His hand clutched at his face as he howled in rage. The young woman recoiled when she realized his face had singed to the point where bone was visible beneath his shaking fingers. Beneath the dirt and filth of use, a gray color shined through the metal at the end of the shovel. The blade of the shovel was made of silver.

Captain Johnny grabbed her by the arm and pulled her

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toward the carriage.

"Get in there!" he ordered even as Steiner dropped his hand.

The vampire's fangs were dripping with saliva and his eyes were ablaze with fury. Violet, knowing herself uselessness in this situation, hurried to the opposite side of the boat to work her way to the rear. Nic, however, wasn't too keen on allowing her such an easy escape from the battle. She had made it around the cabin before Nic vaulted over the humans. He landed in front of her just as she reached the door to the carriage. She let out a shriek and backed up a few feet.

"None of that now, missy," Nic scolded. He cast a feral grin on her slim, pert form. "We're going to have ourselves a little fun."

Violet's eyes were filled with terror, and she glanced passed him to the protection offered by the carriage. She noticed a movement behind the curtains in one of the windows, and both her and her assailant were shocked when something orange shot out of the vehicle. The small shadow attached itself to Nic's back with a loud flurry of hisses and growls. The old cat had seen Violet in need and had come to her aid. Even now his claws were burying their way into the vampire's dead flesh, and Nic howled in anger and confusion.

"Get the hell off me!"

The vampire's arms flailed backward as he tried to grab the hissing, spitting thing, but the cat was too wily for him. It stayed just out of his reach and bit at the back of his head. The feline distracted the monster long enough for the crew to hurry to the young woman's side. Stover led the charge against Nic as another of the men pulled Violet away. The crew jumped the vampire and pounded away with their weapons. From the roars of pain which emanated from Nic, those weapons with metal balls on the ends of their poles also proved to be tipped with silver.

With his prey out of his reach Nic thought only of escaping

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the circle of pounding, and he finally managed to get a hold of the old cat. He flung the poor creature against the carriage and jumped free of the silver-tipped poles. Stover watched the vampire's great leap into the air and judged the landing point to be on the starboard side. He turned back and frantically looked around for something to make Nic's landing less hospitable. His eyes fell on the barrels stacked on deck, and an idea struck him.

He rushed the short distance to the wooden containers and grabbed a barrel. Stover tossed the round hauling container toward the edge of the boat. The barrel was just in time to catch Nic as he came back down to the deck and knocked him onto the boards, but didn't push him over. The rest of the crew understood what Stover meant to do and each in their turn grabbed a barrel. They launched the containers quick as they could at the dazed vampire even as he was trying to stand up.

The barrels slammed into his legs and knocked him back to the edge of the boat and beyond. Nic let out a blood-curdling scream as he fell into the fast-moving water. He disappeared beneath the surface and the current took his shadow far down the river. The men watched for signs of his surfacing, but he did not rise.

Violet, however, was focused on her fallen feline companion. She rushed over to the old cat and gingerly lifted him into her arms. His paws and tail hung limp, and she feared the worst as tears rose to her eyes. Then a small mew told her the fears were ungrounded, and the cat slowly opened its eyes.

"Thank you," she told the small kitty as she gave him a tight hug. She buried her face into its thick fur. "Thank you so much."

Captain Johnny had remained at the bow of the boat while his men went to help Violet, and he faced Steiner with a smirk on his face. The vampire's dark red eyes glanced between the shovel

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and the wielder. The captain tapped the shovel on the deck and revealed more of the silver metal.

"You like my silver shovel?" he asked the vampire as he nodded at the blade. "Didn't think I'd get to use it on such a big guy, but you'll give her a good breaking-in."

"Enjoy your toy while you hold it," Steiner snarled. At his side his clawed hands were bundled into fists. "Zere vill be no oter chance for you to use it."

"Try me, demon," Captain Johnny challenged.

Steiner growled and charged the man. For any human watching the attack, they would have been unable to see anything but a flash of movement rushing at Captain Johnny. The two opponents collided as Steiner swung his first blow with a fist aimed at the man's head. The captain, however, deftly blocked the blow with the blade and vampire's skin again connected with silver. This time the pain only fueled Steiner's rage, and he repeated strike after strike.

Captain Johnny had the upper hand in the struggle. He was cool and calm as he blocked every blow with either the blade or the handle, and he was quite at ease with the rocking of the boat. Steiner, however, was thrown off balance with each shift of his prodigious weight, and he found his opponent equal to him in both strength and speed. The shovel, too, left its mark on his skin as his knuckles smoldered with his burning skin. His blood soaked his clothes and splattered along the deck, the mess of which caught the captain's humor.

"I'll have you scrubbing your own blood off these boards if you don't give up now," Captain Johnny laughed at his beaten and battered foe.

Steiner found nothing to be amused with while his swings became more wild with his fury. After being rebuffed for the fourth time Steiner was forced to call a retreat. He felt mortified at a human having bested him, but he could not win this battle alone. However, the captain had no plans for allowing anyone to board

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his ship and leave without his permission. Steiner tried to flee with a great leap across the gap to the shore, but Captain Johnny tossed the shovel at his legs and caused him to trip. The vampire fell forward across the sideboards of the ship. The captain walked up behind the fallen vampire and retrieved his shovel from the ground. Steiner flipped over to lay on his back, and his terrified eyes glanced up into Captain Johnny's merciless face. The vampire saw no mercy in those dark eyes, and screamed as the man raised the shovel.

The blade came down on his neck and cleanly removed his head from his shoulders. The head rolled into the river and the body collapsed into a pile of dust.

"What do you think of Watchers now?" Captain Johnny spat out as he kicked at the ashen remains.

The seaman looked to the stern of the ship and saw that his crew had just dispatched with their own foe. Then the captain glanced to the shore to see the outcome of that fight. His face fell when he glimpsed Will on the ground. Violet, too, noticed the figure laying in the dirt.

Chapter 15

"Will!" Violet cried out. She set down the recovered cat and hurried to the side of the boat. Her eyes looked out upon the few yards to the shoreline and the deep water which covered the distance. He may as well have been a dozen miles away for all she could reach him. "Will!" He didn't stir.

"Push her to shore!" Captain Johnny ordered his crew.

The men, though mentally exhausted from their ordeal, pulled out the long poles which had been laying against the sides. The poles were set into the water and the ends pushed against the river bed to move the boat to the bank. The whole process took a few moments, and Violet anxiously waited as the boat crept closer to land. When they hit the dirt, a few of the men pounded stakes into the soil with short ropes tied to the boat to keep the craft from floating away. Captain Johnny set a plank against the bank and swiftly stepped across the board. He was at Will's side in a moment with Violet hurrying up behind him. She knelt down at Will's side, but dared not touch him.

"Is he...is he dead?" she asked in a quivering voice. Captain Johnny looked over the fallen vampire with his lips pursed, and then he leaned back with a sigh. He chuckled and shook his head.

"He's lost a lot of blood, but that don't stop a vampire from ticking," the good captain informed her. "He's just sleeping off the wounds." Johnny glanced up at the animals still wrapped in the towlines. They were all dead. "We have other problems now. There's no way we'll be able to move out of here without animals, and those hoggee have clear taken off without so much as a care for them beasts."

"Can horses work?" Violet wondered. She nodded to the vacant coach left by their opponents.

"Those won't work at all, if I'm seeing them right," Captain Johnny replied. His eyes narrowed as he gave them a thorough

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look. "Without their masters they'll be dead come sun up." That's when they heard loud sounds of neighing from the boat, and they both glanced over to see Will's steeds pawing at the planks. "It looks like Will's horses want to help him, though."

As speaking the devil's name calls him, Will groaned and his head moved from side to side. Violet was overjoyed when his eyes fluttered open.

"About time, Will," Captain Johnny scolded with a laugh. "You've slept long enough this night. How do you feel?"

"Like a carriage has run me over," Will answered. With Violet's assistance he sat up and rubbed his head where there lay multiple bruises from his fight

"Well, nothing a little drink won't fix," the captain suggested. He pulled out his flask and handed it to Will. "Nothing to fear from this. You'll be sure to like this stuff." Will frowned and took a sip. He stiffened and his eyes shot back to Captain Johnny. His voice was sharp and hard.

"Where did you get this?"

"Don't go looking at me like that, Will Stewart. Caleb gave it to me of his own will. He figured you'd need some help, and a dying man would be willing to trade his soul for a little more time," Captain Johnny replied. There was a twinkle in his eyes. "So I kinda made a deal with the ol' devil."

"How could you be so foolish?" Will asked the captain. He was angry at his old friend for doing this to himself and treating it as though the whole decision was some game.

"What's wrong? What is it?" Violet wondered as she glanced between the two men. Will turned his face away, but Captain Johnny looked to her with a smile.

"Ol' Caleb found out I was on my last leg and figured giving me a flask of his blood would cure me right up," he explained to her. She was as shocked by this revelation as Will. For his part, Captain Johnny took back the flask and gave it another swig. He smacked his lips together at the taste of cold,

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rust-flavored blood. "Only problem is I'll be like you folks in a couple of months, but that's better than being six feet under like I was expecting."

"Selling your soul for immortality? You should know as well as anyone the consequences for becoming a vampire," Will countered. He was angry, but the captain wasn't sure if the ire was directed at himself or Caleb. Perhaps both. "I never thought you'd stoop so low as to become a Watcher."

"Well, what's done is done, so no sense crying over it," Captain Johnny replied. He clamored to his feet and held out his hand to Will. "Even if you think I'm stupid for having done it, I'm still willing to take you two as far as ya need to go. Just don't keep reminding me how I'm damned for eternity. I got enough of that preaching from my minister father when I was a boy, and I ain't gonna take it now."

Will glanced between the hand and the man who offered it. Then he felt a small hand settle on his shoulder, and he looked to his side to see Violet smiling at him. She nodded at the offered hand.

"No matter what Captain Johnny is, he's still a good friend."

Will was startled by how certain her voice sounded when she spoke those words. He turned back to the captain, and grudgingly slapped his hand into the offered palm. Captain Johnny only smiled and pulled Will to his feet. The three companions were startled when from the boat came the sounds of hollers and whistles. The crew stood on the plank and watched the whole ordeal, and they were all grins for the happy ending. Violet covered her mouth to stifle her laughter, and their captain waved them away.

"Enough of that, you jackanapes. Start getting some ropes to drag these beasts off the road." The captain glanced down the towpath to where the temporary driver's body lay. "And give that man as decent a burial as you can manage. The poor fool only had

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bad luck in his acquaintances."

Will was already looking better because of the blood from his guardian, and for the first time he noticed the dead animals tangled in the towpath line. Captain Johnny saw where his gaze lay.

"We could cut them loose, but we need to get your horses in their place. Think you can help do that?"

"If your men are able to make the ramp, they will be pulling the boat within the hour," Will answered. He stepped forward and swayed a little, but Violet caught him against herself.

"Are you sure you're all right?" she asked him, and he nodded.

"By tomorrow this will have passed," he assured her. Will stood on his own again and followed the captain to the plank. "For now we must drag these animals off the road and make as great a distance as we can manage from Hanson's carriage."

Violet turned to the abandoned carriage. The horses were pawing the ground and their eyes were on the pile of ash which had once been Hanson. Violet walked over to them and when she was a few feet from where they stood she held out her hand. The steeds watched her with their bright red eyes, but they let her approach and pet their foreheads.

"I'm sorry for you," she whispered.

Violet moved passed them and unclasped the carriage from their backs. She couldn't leave them to die so horribly attached to the carriage of their destroyed master. Once released, the horses strode forward to Hanson's remains. They sniffed the pile and lifted their heads to the night sky. Their whinnies, like cries of mourning, filled the air.

"Violet," Will called where he stood at the top of the plank. He held out his hand to her. "We must leave soon." The crew was even now lashing boards together to serve as a ramp the horses could use to reach the towpath. They were fortunate the banks against the towpaths were low where they'd been grounded, for

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there was hardly a foot between the water's edge and where the path lay.

Violet nodded and walked over to take his hand. Their fingers intertwined, but then she paused. There was a question which was bothering her.

"Will, you and the captain mentioned a name, Watcher. What does that mean?"

"When a human drinks the blood of a vampire, they slowly become an undead. During their change, the vampire is able to look through their eyes and see what they see. The vampire can also take control of the human's body, if they find it necessary."

"Much like what happened to the coachman?" Will nodded, and Violet winced at the abuse of such an ability.

"But we had better get to the boat. The horses need readied."

He led her to the carriage with instructions to keep with the feline while the men prepared the horses. Will and Captain Johnny removed the dead oxen and quickly covered their bodies some yards from the path. In a few more minutes the steeds had been hitched to the towline and Stover remained on shore to guide them along the road. Then they began their slow progression back up the canal as though nothing had ever stopped them.

Violet felt so useless while she sat in the doorway of the carriage. The feline gave her some comfort when it jumped into her lap and contentedly purred as she stroked his soft fur. He was much recovered, and she wondered at the speed and strength he had exhibited during the fight. She looked back one last time at the scene of the battle. The horses still stood over their fallen master. She hoped they would protect themselves when the sun rose in a few hours.

With the crew handling the steering and nothing more for him to do, Will came over and leaned against the side of the carriage beside his fledgling. He glanced between his two companions, the girl and the cat.

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"I was told by Stover that the cat was of great use in the fight," Will informed her. She smiled and nodded her head.

"He knew I was in trouble and came to rescue me," she replied with a small laugh. She scratched beneath the cat's chin, and one of the back legs kicked with joy. Violet felt there was something more to Will's talking. "Something's bothering you, isn't it?" He fidgeted against the carriage and looked most displeased, but only with himself.

"I'm sorry it was not I who was there for you," her guardian apologized. "I should not have abandoned you so hastily." For her part, however, she closed her eyes and shook her head.

"You couldn't have known what the future held," Violet argued. She looked up into his serious, pale face with a bright, sincere smile. "Don't fret. After all, everything turned out well."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Will answered as he glanced toward the trees which lined the towpath.

Will couldn't help but wonder for what purpose those vampires had taken such a risk against them. He felt it did indeed have something to do with his guardian, and they would find the answer when they reached Caleb's estate. The young man would also have some choice words for his guardian's insistence on tracking his whereabouts, and using an old friend to do it. However, first they were in need of a better pair of animals for the packet boat. Will's own pair of steeds would break under the pressure if they were forced to tow the ship all the way to the lakes.

"Are you sure you'll be fine?" Violet broke through his thoughts. She worried about his extreme pallor.

"It merely requires a day's rest to regain my full strength," he comforted her. He glanced at her appearance and was glad to see nothing was amiss with her. However, her hands shook and she tried to hide the fear by clasping her fingers together. Regardless of Violet's earlier words, Will still blamed himself for not being able to protect her himself. "I'm sorry I could not

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protect you as well as I should have. You should have been better guarded."

"No, it's fine," she disagreed with a shake of her head. "I'm fine, so there's nothing to apologize for."

The companions were quiet for many minutes, and the ship was pulled along the canal. Though they had been delayed by the battle, they went along at a good clip and there was light traffic. A few hours before the dawn found the packet boat and its passengers at the port city of Cleveland. The captain and his crew steered the packet boat into the small inlet where lay the wooden docks for the growing city. Once they were beside one of the long planks, the boat was firmly lashed to the dock. The horses were grateful for the stop, and Captain Johnny offered to have them stabled for the day on his own bill.

"They're good steeds, Will," the captain complimented as he gave each of them a soft pat on the nose. Their bodies were covered in sweat at the exertion, but still they whinnied when their master came up beside them. "Might you want to sell them one day, I'd be glad to have 'em." Will smiled at the offer, but shook his head.

"The day I part with them will be the same day they are buried."

"Ah well, I suppose I'll have to be happy with a new set of oxen and some new hoggees. Hopefully the next batch have more spine than the last." He glanced up at the early morning sky. "We might not find either of those until sun up, so we'll anchor here for the next few hours. We'll get started back on the canal as soon as we can."

"Is it safe to stop for so long?" Violet asked the men.

"I wish we had a choice, Miss Violet, but the horses can't take us any farther without hurting themselves and the livery don't serve anyone at this hour," Captain Johnny informed her. "Best just watch our backs and get on when we can, but I imagine we took care of those three."

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"I'm not so sure about the one that fell into the canal, but he may not try us a second time," Will agreed with their confident friend. He then turned to Violet. "Would you like to take a short walk along the canal? We'll reach the lakes in a short while and won't have the chance until next landfall."

"Are you sure? I mean, I wouldn't mind staying aboard." She was still worried for his health, but Will could see she was sorely tempted to step back onto sturdy ground. He held out his arm for her to take.

"I'll be fine. A simple walk won't harm me." Violet blushed at his accurate assumption of her thoughts, but she gladly took his arm.

Will led Violet up the gang-plank and onto the dock. As with all the other towns they had come upon, the taverns were busy promoting the sins of their patrons and a great ruckus was heard in the gambling dens. Fortunately those were far off in the center of town, and the two vampires skirted the entire port for a fresh, quiet wood path which encircled Cleveland on the land sides. The noises behind them disappeared and in a few minutes they were encompassed by a patch of ancient trees. The fat limbs stretched out over them and shadowed much of the path. Violet was glad for Will's arm, as she wasn't sure she'd be able to navigate the trail. She was also thankful for the solitude, for she wanted to ask her guardian a few questions about the attack.

"Will, why do you think those other vampires attacked us?"

"I cannot pretend to know the reason, but I can guess," he replied, and she laughed.

"Then guess away. We have nothing else to go on."

"They came very close to killing us on the ship, and yet they didn't. With their temperaments I believe they didn't have any qualms about killing us at the tavern where we dined with them, either."

"So what you're saying is they weren't trying to kill us?" Will nodded his head, but Violet was still confused. "Then for

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what purpose did they set themselves up as our enemies?"

"I believe they set themselves up as obstacles to stop us, but as I said before I cannot imagine for what reason," Will told her.

By this time they had long gone out of the packet boat and the docks, and were completely alone. That is, they thought they were alone. Violet flinched back when Will suddenly stopped and held out his hand across her path. She glanced up into his face and noticed he looked out on a path to their right, which was the side on which he stood. Her untrained eyes saw nothing but the shadows beneath the trees. However, Will noticed a movement which should not have been there, and he called out to the darkness.

"Hello? Who's there?"

"A rider you're familiar with," an unknown voice called back. A figure partially emerged from the path and though the person remained in the shadows, they both recognized the voice of the sheriff. Because the man's coat was open, they could also see the tin star on his chest shining in the moonlight.

"Have you come for another pointless fight?" Will asked the man. His weakened senses were telling him that something was amiss with this meeting. There was an unknown difference than the last they'd had with the lawman, but he couldn't point out the problem with the man shrouded in the darkness.

"Not pointless, and the fight is up to you."

"There's no need for either of those. We caught the men who killed your deputy and the hotel owner. They're dead now," Will told him. The sheriff didn't appear to hear him, as the man's head was still turned toward Violet.

"That doesn't matter anymore." The pair were very much surprised by the lawman's proclamation. Justice had been served for his fallen comrade, and yet the sheriff was disinterested. He was also not in the least bit surprised. "Only the girl needs to come with me." Will was very tired of this man's narrow-minded

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focus.

"And I told you before that I won't let you do that, and you know you cannot defeat me."

"Things have changed."

The rest of the man emerged from the shadows and his pale face was revealed to them. The sheriff's eyes gleamed with a dark, auburn color very much different from the blue eyes he had sported last they met. Will put his arm in front of Violet and pushed her back behind him.

"You must know by my appearance that Justice isn't my master anymore." Will's eyes narrowed and his gaze shot to the man's neck. There were two small marks there on his skin. His suspicions were confirmed. The man was a vampire. The only question that remained was who his master was.

"I can see that very much, but I wonder why you come to us now. Who orders do you follow? Hanson's commands?"

"No, my master kept me back in case they shouldn't succeed." The sheriff's voice was clipped, careful. He was restrained from speaking openly by some other entity. Will judged it to be the former lawman's master, and that showed that he had not been created by the two they had destroyed along the canal. "Will you give her over or are we to fight?"

"No, but first tell me why we should fight. Otherwise we're wasting bullets," Will called back.

"You don't need to know," his opponent argued.

"Think of it as a warrant. Without one you're not doing your job." The sheriff considered the request for a moment, and his face contorted with indecision. Perhaps he was even fighting against his master's control. Will devised one last push using the man's honor as a sheriff. "Do you hesitate because there's no honorable purpose to your actions? You follow for no warrant, no reason, other than to harm those you're supposed to protect." That did the trick, for the sheriff scowled and he took control over himself for just a moment.

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"There's something going on in the east. You're needed out of the way for a while yet, at least until we're ready."

The lawman suddenly bent over and clutched his head in one hand. They could see his teeth grind together and his eyes were shut tight. He'd said too much, but not near enough for Will and Violet to understand their opponents' reasoning for attacking them. Unfortunately the sheriff was no longer inclined to speak, for he straightened himself and put his hand on the butt of his gun.

"But enough of that. This is the last time I ask that you give me the girl."

"Then this is the last time I will refuse," Will countered. He pushed Violet away from him so no missed shot would hit her, and then brushed back his coat to reveal his own weapon.

The vampires stood two dozen yards from one another, hardly a distance where either of them would miss. They were both too experienced with their firearms. It need only be decided who would go for their gun first, and the wounding or destruction of one or the other would decide the winner. A faster draw with a good aim was key to surviving, but Will also relied on his greater age and experience with vampiric abilities. The man had been mortal less than a week. Will hoped that meant the sheriff hadn't had time to acquire a decent hand at dueling using their extreme speed. He watched every part of the former lawman's tense body for even the slightest hint of movement.

They both waited. The seconds ticked by, and yet no one so much as flinched. Then there it was. The sheriff made the first move. He pulled out his pistol and got off the first shot. Will felt it strike just a few inches above his heart and tear through the back of his body. However, he didn't let that slow down his own turn and he drew forth his weapon. He aimed the barrel at the man's gun-hand and blew the weapon from his enemy's fingers. Then Will discharged another shot into both hands and rendering him useless for any further dueling. He never meant to kill the new vampire, not yet at least. There was vital information hidden in

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that mind of his which Will wished to know.

The sheriff cried out against the pain of the silver bullets from Will's gun. He fell to his knees and cradled his hands against his body. Will stepped up to the man and pointed the barrel at his opponent's head. The former lawman glanced up into the cold steel, and his face paled.

"It appears your master made you out to be just another distraction," Will commented. "You have normal bullets, and our kind are only killed by silver ones." His fallen opponent pondered Will's words, and from the sullen expression he had come to the same conclusion.

"Go ahead then, pull the trigger if you feel you must. I won't-can't tell you anything you wish to know and my master will force me to follow you," the lawman replied. There was a half smile on his lips, and his gaze was unwavering. "Release me from this awful existence."

Will paused for a moment, and then his mouth set into a straight line. His eyes hardened and he cocked back the hammer on his pistol. Violet looked away when he pulled the trigger, and the shot echoed through the quiet air. The vampire fell to a pile of dust and clothes, and far off in the woods they heard a horse skitter away. Will holstered his gun and heard a small sob come from Violet. He turned and wrapped his arm around her quaking shoulders.

"We had better get back to the boat to check on Captain Johnny and his crew."

They turned back and found the ship and its crew were in better straights than when they'd left. The resourceful captain had found a new team of oxen to pull the packet boat, and they were ready to embark when the vampires returned. Captain Johnny wondered if they wanted to spend another night at port.

"We had better leave immediately," Will replied. The vampire's tone told the seaman all he needed to know, and the order was given to shove off.

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In a few minutes they were once more drifting down the canal, but not for long. Cleveland was situated along the shores of the Great Lakes, and when they entered those great bodies of water they would be set adrift by the hoggees. Then the sails would come up and the ship would be driven by the wind to the opening of the Erie Canal.

Violet was interested in her first view of the Great Lakes. She stepped up to the bow and looked on as the path along the canal opened wide. Beyond her sight lay a great expanse of water, greater than she had ever seen. The waves stretched out beyond the shores and out into the great depths. It was a wonder to her that so much water could exist in a single place.

The men on land called orders from their spot on the towpath and the lines were released. The boat drifted into those deep waters while Captain Johnny's crew set up the sails and mast. Back from her near the steerage area stood Will, who watched her wonderment with a mix of amusement and anxiety. She was still so naive. He wondered if she was truly suitable to this life she'd been thrust into by his careless action. Captain Johnny came up beside him, and glanced from guardian to charge and back.

"A fine girl you have there," the captain complimented, and he paid close attention to Will's expression. The man was glad to see a spirit of pride beneath his friend's worried exterior.

"Indeed," Will readily agreed. He couldn't doubt that she was a good person, much like his guardian. Even in this commonly heartless existence, they still held heart. He hoped she would never change that part of herself. "None better."

"So you find more trouble out at the last port?"

"Another destroyed vampire, and more unanswered questions," Will replied. He didn't feel up to discussing the details.

"So you figure out exactly why those fellows were trying to make you more dead than you are?" Captain Johnny wondered as he scrutinized Will's face. "More of them battles between Caleb and that other family?" Will only shook his head.

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"Those only are assumptions. I'll only know when I speak with Caleb," Will admitted. The captain realized he wouldn't get anything more out of his friend, so he left to supervise the boat.

Meanwhile, Violet continued to glance out at the open water. The men behind her managed to raise the rigging for the sails. Soon the shore would be distant and any danger from land would vanish like the earth itself. She couldn't help when her mind wandered back to the sheriff and his new fate as a vampire.

"You shouldn't think that way."

Violet was startled by the voice and her hands slipped off the short wall of the boat. She caught herself and swung around to find her guardian standing a few yards behind her.

"William Stewart, you should no better than to sneak up on people," she scolded. If her heart still beat, it would have been loudly thumping in her chest.

"Temptation has a strong pull." He moved over to stand at her side. "But my words still stand. You shouldn't believe us responsible for our enemies' doings."

"I know, but-"

"No buts, or ands, or maybes. Everyone person, vampire or human, is alone responsible for their own actions." Violet tilted her head toward him and smiled.

"You are very persistent."

"I believe I've inherited that from both my own guardian and my guarded," Will quipped. Violet shook her head and looked at the lake spread out before them. That reminded her guardian of one problem he had with her. "Perhaps we should teach you to swim," Will spoke up, and Violet blushed.

"You heard my mention of that?" she asked, and he chuckled.

"Have you forgotten the abilities of our hearing?"

"When I am able to use them, I will remember them," Violet countered in good humor. "But is it so far that I need to worry about the water?"

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"The journey across the water will take a few days, and then we'll reach Buffalo," he told her. "Then we will follow the Erie Canal to Albany, and from there to Caleb's estate. The whole journey will take the better part of a fortnight."

"And then we will be safe?" Violet wondered.

"For a time, but we must find the reason why those other vampires attacked us," Will explained. "Whoever or whatever pushed them on will not quit until their objective is accomplished."

Violet turned away and folded her arms around herself to stop the shiver of fear which slid down her body. Will came to stand behind her, and he wrapped his own arms around her slender form. She glanced up into his bright eyes.

"It will be fine," he assured her. Violet said nothing, but she sidled up against him and closed her eyes. She felt safe with him so near, and that was enough for her.

Will smiled, and glanced back out onto the wide lake waters. They had many more days and weeks and years ahead on this journey together across the endless waters of time. No matter what plans their enemies had for them, he would protect her at all costs. Even if that meant his life.

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About the Book

Greetings readers,

First off, to all those who have read this far I heartily salute you. This book has been a particular joy to write given the amount of research involved, and I'm glad to see you read through the story in its entirety. If you just happened to skip to this part, then ignore the first two sentences and a pox be upon your house.

Fortunately this section isn't really for hexing people, but for telling something of the back story of the, well, story. The epic origin of the plot came from my usual repository of strange ideas, a dream. Unfortunately the dream only encompassed the first two chapters of this book up to Violet's reawakening, and were a little more, ahem, racy. I toned them down to get passed the censors (otherwise known as my prudish editor), and out popped the lovable pair of vampires and their first interaction.

However, from there I was completely on my own. Given the western-style of those vivid images from my dream, I figured only a story set in the dusty west would do. Now how did I pick Ohio for the setting? Truth be told the idea of the canals (and thus Ohio) fell into my lap during my research into the guns I wanted to use (pepper-box pistols are just too cool not to use) and from the few exterior scenes I'd seen in my dream. I also couldn't pass up an opportunity to use those innovative (for that time) waterways as a pivotal point in my story, mostly because I wanted to write the chase scene of our heroes from the southern portions of the state all the way up to the Great Lakes.

Everything else fell into place (or were hammered there like naughty jigsaw puzzles), and a story was born. Oh, there were plenty of hiccups along the way (most dealing with how far they had to travel and how long it'd take them), but the characters behaved themselves (except Hermes, he bit me a couple of times) and the story is how you see it. I hope you enjoyed the read and

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look forward to entertaining you in the next three installments of the Blood Guardians series!

Sincerely,

Heidi Willard

What, haven't gotten enough of my ramblings? How about some stats to scare you off?

Estimated writing time: 20 days

Estimated words: 60,000

Estimated mental breakdowns: 2

Time took editing: 12 hours

Caffeine level during writing: high

Time for cover: 15 hours (I couldn't make up my mind)

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Thank you for reading this book, your support is very much appreciated! Without your support, I wouldn't be writing anything, so there's always room for you in my dedications.

I know your time is valuable and I sincerely thank you for finishing this novel! If you would take a brief moment to return to where you purchased the book and leave a review it would be much appreciated! Reviews help new readers find my work and accurately decide if the book is for them as well as provide valuable feedback for my future writing.

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